

## Natural Retreats hill track application sandbagged!

### Description



Photo credit Alan Bratney

On Tuesday I learned from one of the good folk at the North East Mountain Trust that a helicopter had been seen at Cairngorm carrying the sandbags, which had been sitting in Coire na Ciste, into the area by the Shieling Rope tow area. Last night I was sent some photos. Its not clear to me what the sandbags are for (whether they are intended as a dam or are simply being stored) or who paid for them to be brought here – but it was by helicopter!



The unlawful Sheiling track runs in front of the middle fence while the rope tow runs behind it. Photo credit Alan Bratney

That's how it used to be done when our public authorities cared more about what happened at Cairngorm. If sandbags can still be brought in by helicopter then so could all the materials for new fencing and for upgrading the lifts. What that shows is there is NO need for the unlawful track that Natural Retreats has created, and which it claims is necessary for maintenance purposes ([see here](#)). If it was the CNPA or Highlands and Islands Enterprise which required the sandbags to be brought in by helicopter they should be congratulated for acting at long last. If the heli-lift was organised by another party, HIE and CNPA should take note and insist on such methods, which avoid damage to vegetation, being used for all future works. Whatever the case there is no reason now for the CNPA not to reject the retrospective application for planning permission for the track and they should then start to turn their attention to how the damaged ground can be repaired and enhanced.

While its possible Natural Retreats organised the helicopter on its own initiative, there was plenty of evidence on Wednesday from elsewhere on the hill that basic standards are still being ignored.



Photo Credit Alan Bratney

The fuel bowser is still on the west wall poma site despite the Method Statement in the planning application saying it would be stored at the Ptarmigan Garage. Highland Council, who approved this planning application, would still appear not to have taken any enforcement action.



This ground, the line of the cable along the Car Park T-bar was supposed to have been restored but has now become a de facto track! Photo credit Alan Bratney

The line of the ditch for the new cabling that was laid beside the car park t-bar has been turned into a new track by constant use. There has been NO planning applications that I am aware of to create a new track here and of the justifications in the retrospective application for the shieling track was to enable vehicles to access the area from above without damaging vegetation lower down. Natural Retreats staff are clearly driving their vehicles anywhere without any controls and HIE and the CNPA need to stop this and ensure the damage is repaired.



Photo credit Alan Bratney

The open ditch for the cables at the bottom of the Fiacail Poma that I saw back on my first visit to Cairngorm in June is still there! Another illustration of Natural Retreats incompetence.

HIE should terminate their lease with Natural Retreats at Cairngorm. Unfortunately the environmental provisions in the lease are pathetic and the other clauses not much better. This was illustrated by a story this week in the Press and Journal under the banner “Tourism goldmine being lost” about the limited opening hours of visitor attractions in the Highlands. The article mentioned Cairngorm Ski resort which it said is open 9am – 4pm throughout the year. Now the P and J may have made a journalistic or printing error, but the HIE lease with Natural Retreats requires (Clause 4a) that catering facilities at Cairngorm should be open 9-5pm in summer and 9-4pm in winter. So, is this another example of Natural Retreats simply ignoring the terms of their lease?

While HIE’s Cairngorm Mountain has never been a goldmine – a publicly financed bank would be a much closer analogy, with investment in the wrong things and with Natural Retreats siphoning public money out of the area – the tourist offering at Cairngorm, as the article suggests, is not good. While catering is a tiny part of this, as an example of the tourism failure in winter there are dozens of climbers

returning from the northern corries after 4pm who cannot even get a cup of tea.

The questions that HIE should answer publicly about the Cairngorm ski resort are not just why its record on the environment is so appalling but why it cannot even get basic services right for visitors and how it ever appointed such an incompetent organisation to run the ski resort. Whether or not they are ever brought to account for their record, the answers to the problems at Cairngorm lie in transferring the land back to the Forestry Commission and transferring management of the ski area from Natural Retreats to a community based enterprise.

### **Category**

1. Cairngorms

### **Tags**

1. CNPA
2. HIE
3. hill tracks
4. natural retreats
5. planning
6. restoration

### **Date Created**

October 28, 2016

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