

The proposals to develop the Ptarmigan at Cairngorm

Description



Photomontage of Option 1 for proposed redevelopment of Ptarmigan. As well as the raised viewing tower, note the glass viewing area added to design

I understand that Natural Retreats were not happy last week that their proposals for Cairngorm were obtained through Freedom of Information ([see here](#)). As John Hutchison pointed out on twitter in response to my post, the secrecy at Cairngorm rather undermines – or perhaps reinforces the need for! – the current Scottish Government consultation on engaging with local communities on decisions about land ([see here](#)). While the draft guidance states there is no need for additional consultation where statutory consultation is required, it appears Natural Retreats and HIE are planning to submit a bog standard planning application without any specific consultation with the local community, let alone with the recreational community or conservation organisations, as would be required if a proper masterplan was developed. No change then to the way HIE has always operated at Cairngorm, plans are developed in secret and then presented as agreed.

More development, high up on Cairngorm, is totally inappropriate



Design Option 2 for the Ptarmigan

Before considering *why* HIE are pushing the development of the Ptarmigan, its worth stating clearly why the proposal is fundamentally flawed:

- Its near the summit of Cairngorm, one of our finest and best known hills. Its not the sort of place where a National Park, whose mission is to protect our finest landscapes, should be allowing further development.
- HIE and Natural Retreats will doubtlessly argue that the increased visual impact created by their proposals will not be that significant, but the job of the National Park should be to see that existing impacts are reduced, not increased.
- In tourist terms, Cairngorm is covered in cloud for much of the time so why would anyone take a train up to near the summit to see..... nothing? The concept is all wrong. If you want to get people to take trains or gondolas up mountains, they need to finish somewhere with a view. In Scotland, this means taking people half way up the hill where they might get a view most days of the year, like the Aonach Mor gondola, not onto the Cairngorm plateau.
- Most tourists, however, want more than a view, which after all you can see easily enough on film. They want to experience the outdoors in some way, which means a walk. Leaving aside the legal agreement, which prevents non-skiers from leaving the stop station, Cairngorm is not a

good place for a walk most of the time – the weather is just too wild, though maybe Natural Retreats think will buy a ticket up the funicular so they can be blown about on a viewing platform. Of course, Cairngorm in fine weather is wonderful, which is why so many people care about the place, but those days are far too few to support mass tourism developments high on the mountain

For these reasons further developments high on Cairngorm are objectionable in principle, something which conservation and recreational organisations have been trying to tell HIE for over twenty years.

Why do HIE and Natural Retreats want to develop the Ptarmigan?

While its not clear at present why the earlier plans to develop the Day Lodge were dropped, the current proposals suggest this is all about the funicular. The risk of developing the Day Lodge into a visitor and conference centre is that on those wet and cloudy days, people would not have bothered to buy a ticket up the funicular.

The funicular was supposed to increase the number of summer visitors to Cairngorm but Natural Retreats figures (from last year) say it all: *“210,000 annual visitors (120,000 in winter and 90,000 in summer) with vast potential to increase”*. The aim of the new Ptarmigan development appears to be to try and attract more summer visitors to Cairngorm.:

TARGETTED OUTCOMES (at maturity)

- △ Increase summer visitors by over 100k
- △ Double summer spend per head to £25
- △ Create 62 FTE roles

Extract from slide obtained through FOI “Cairngorm Mountain Resort Development Plans”



The initial plan was to increase visitor numbers through the

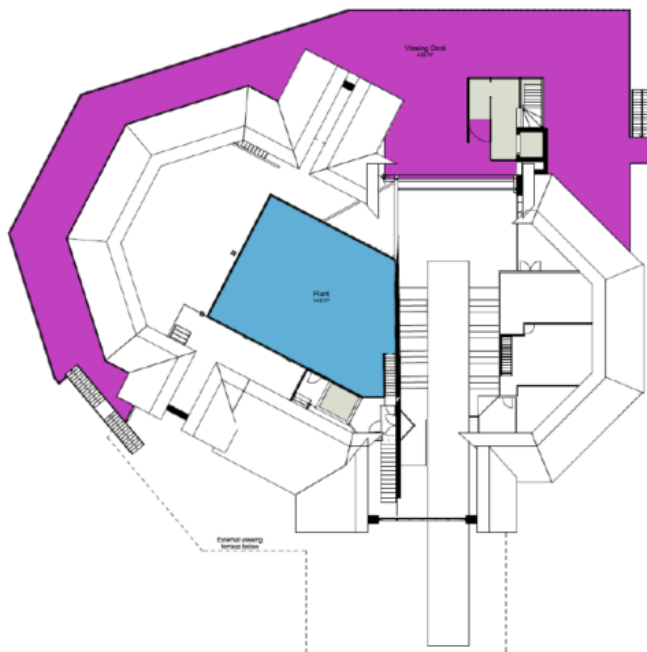
creation of three mountain bike trails down from the funicular top station, as mooted in press. However, it appears the other public agencies made it clear they would not relax the legal agreement

preventing people from leaving the top station. This is not surprising. One could hardly justify mountain bikers leaving the stop station while pedestrians were stuck inside.

With regard to the Ptarmigan station and surrounds. SNH is supportive of options that will provide more opportunities for visitors to enjoy the experience at the Ptarmigan station where it can be shown that any change will retain the purpose of the s49a/S50 Legal Agreement associated with Planning Permission for the Cairngorm Funicular Railway. In particular Natural Retreats proposals must show that any proposals for extending the outdoor experience for visitors to the Ptarmigan station including additional outside access on the Ptarmigan station and, potential managed access to the tunnel entrance, will be in keeping with the purpose and delivery of the existing Visitor Management Plan. In addition, the proposed extensions to the Ptarmigan station incorporate a significant increase of glass to the building. We advise that Natural Retreats incorporate an evidence based design that this will not lead to bird strikes on the building by species such as dotterel, snow bunting and ptarmigan. We have attached below some references to research on bird strikes and potential mitigation measures that may help.

Advice from SNH obtained through FOI

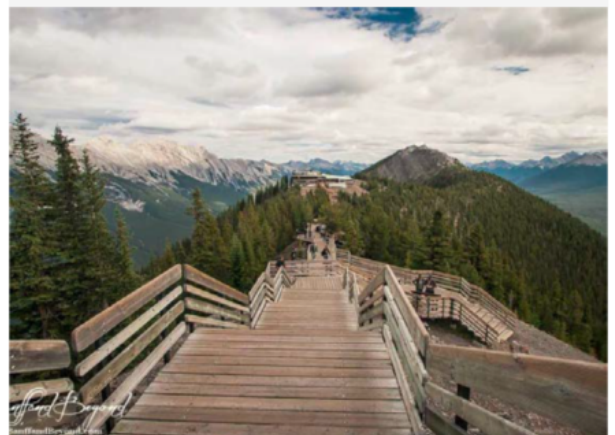
Once the mountain biking proposal was dropped, the only option was to try and think of ways of turning the Ptarmigan into a tourist attraction which visitors would want to visit even though they were unlikely to see anything and would not be allowed out for a walk. Hence the proposals for viewing towers in the top two photomontages and for a wrap around viewing platform added on to the existing building (purple area below):



PTARMIGAN EXPANSION

External Proposal

- △ Introduce secure, high level wrap around walkway
- △ Provide better viewing platform
- △ Introduce external, secure boardwalk over the tunnel



This and following slides all from documents entitled "Cairngorms Mountain Resort Development

Plans” obtained through FOI

And, in order to give people an “authentic” taste of the outdoors, a board walk out over the top of the funicular tunnel was proposed:

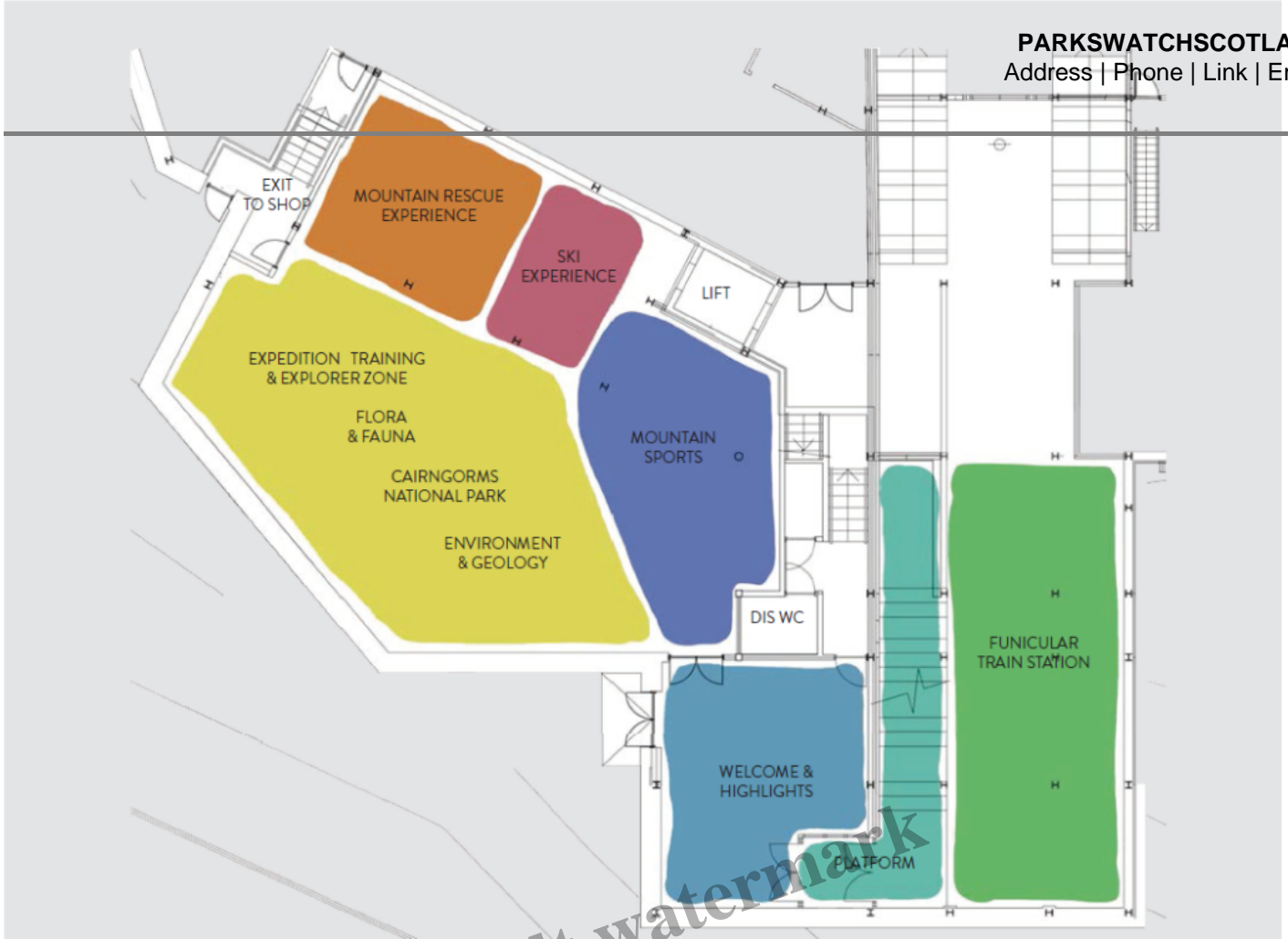
PROPOSED MOUNTAIN BOARDWALK



- △ It is proposed that a boardwalk over the funicular tunnel will connect to the existing terrace.
- △ Side rails will be provided to allow safe access to the boardwalk and prevent visitors accessing the mountain.
- △ The design will allow access for all to the boardwalk
- △ Approximate length of boardwalk 30 - 40 metres
- △ The boardwalk will be stilted and raised from the ground



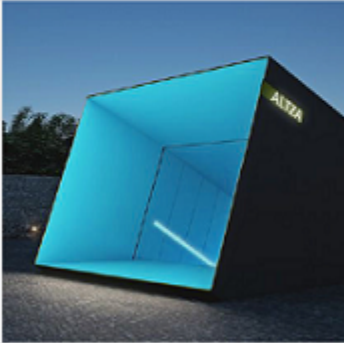
Inside, the idea is first to provide a visitor attraction:



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Funicular Train Station

Sense of arrival at entrance



Bold graphics and light installation within the tunnel



Walls of base station used to tell the story of the Funicular



Iconic signage



Faceted surfaces show key information about the unique railway system and provide waiting benches for passengers



Viewing station to see mountain top

THROUGH THE MO
Your journey underneath
starts at the entrance to
base station. Take a
highest railway in
You'll step out of the
station at a g
1,097 m (3,599
ft) above sea
level.

PTARMIGAN EXHIBITION

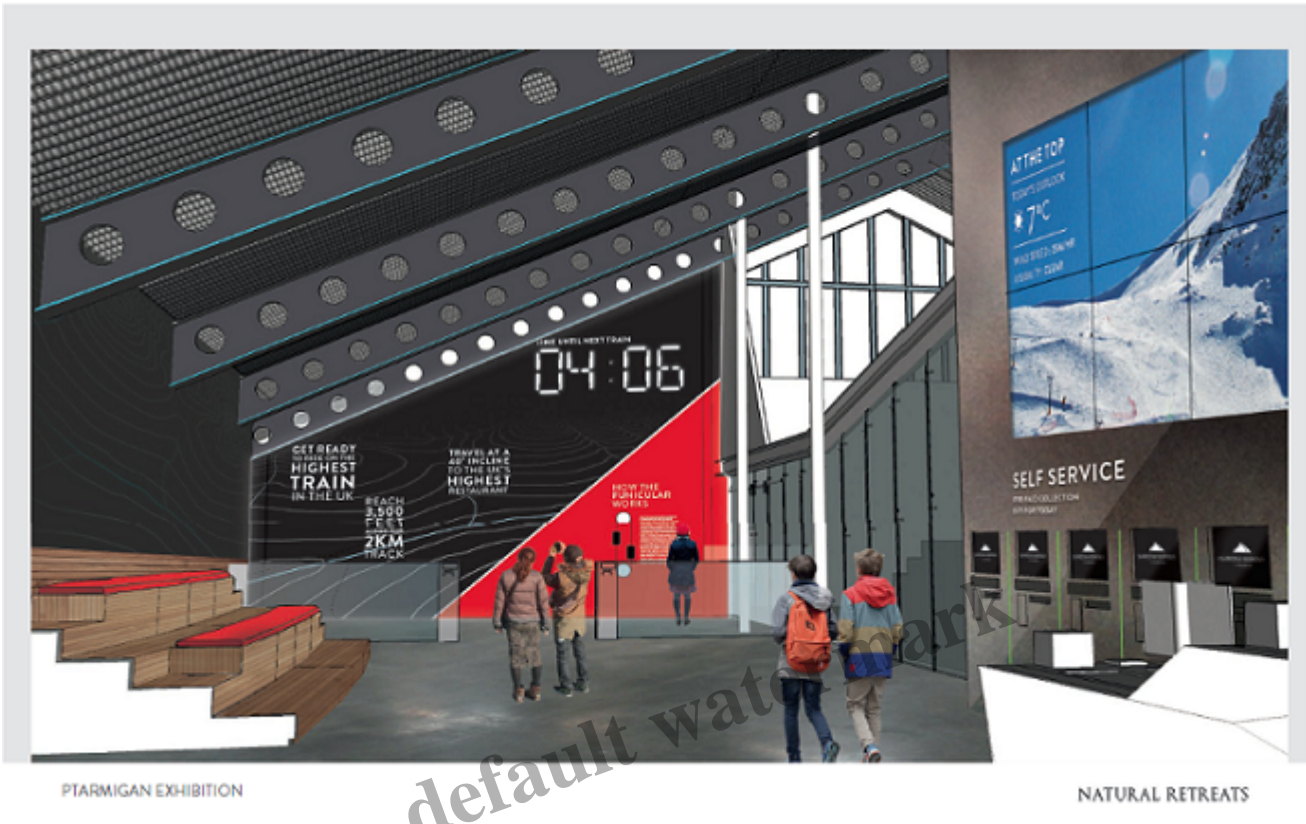
NATURAL

Then, a much larger cafe so people have somewhere to go and spend money after viewing the exhibitions.

And finally, to encourage people arriving at Cairngorm to buy the ticket up the funicular, a partial facelift for the funicular entrance and funicular itself are proposed:

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Base station: back wall



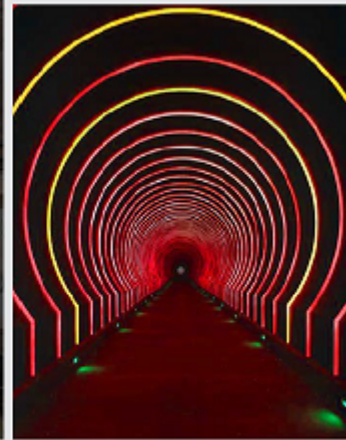
PTARMIGAN EXHIBITION

NATURAL RETREATS

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The Funicular Carri

- Carriage to be resprayed in black gloss
- Electro Luminescent flexible trim applied to edges and windows



Why the proposals are misguided and what needs to happen

Whatever you think of the designs – and the firms that have developed them, 365 and 442, have some very skilled people – the problem is they are for a development in the wrong place:

- Adding glass covered walkways and viewing towers to a visitor facility is a good idea but not appropriate for Cairngorm
- The proposals for the exhibition may be interesting, but the place for a visitor centre is lower down the mountain, where people can go out afterwards and experience some of what has been shown as in Coire cas.
- The blingy funicular upgrade might be a great idea for Blackpool but not Cairngorm

The basic problem is that HIE are still hooked on trying to increase funicular numbers in summer, still trying to make their asset pay. They don't appear to understand most people who visit the National

Park in summer want to be outside. Why would such people ever want to take the funicular when they have the whole of Glenmore to experience? A visitor centre might be a good option for a wet day but a visitor centre up the top of a mountain on a wet day will be a disappointing experience.

Maybe HIE has conducted proper visitor surveys providing evidence that lots of people visiting Glenmore would pay to visit such a facility and this has informed their decision to lend £4 to Natural Retreats – but somehow I doubt it (I will ask). Consultation is not HIE's forte.

A little early engagement with all interests (and not just public authorities) – as recommended by the Scottish Government – would prevent HIE adding to the financial disaster of the funicular, for which it of course was responsible.

Meantime, there is no sign of any proper plan being developed for Cairngorm. HIE was tasked under the Glenmore and Cairngorm Strategy with producing a Cairngorm Estate Management Plan – there is still no sign of this or the proposed Montane Woodland Project on Cairngorm and in my view both should have been agreed BEFORE any development proposals. The Cairngorms National Park Authority also asked Natural Retreats to produce a set of standards to guide their operations on the mountain and there has been no sign of this either.

Its time for the Cairngorms National Park Authority to start speaking up for Cairngorm and a first step would be to ask Natural Retreats and HIE to start consulting on all the other proposed plans before any development proposals are considered. If they are also feeling brave, they could point out to HIE and Natural Retreats that the priority for sustaining the local economy is maintaining winter visitor numbers, not summer visitors.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. HIE
3. landscape
4. natural retreats
5. planning
6. Scottish Government
7. secrecy
8. Tourism

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