HIE and Natural Retreats proposal for an artificial ski slope at Cairngorm

Description



Aerial view of the proposed two new ski slopes obtained through an FOI request

Natural Retreats proposals for two artificial ski slopes at Cairngorm, which HIE announced in April had been agreed as part of a masterplan (see here), would, if given the go-ahead, add to the environmental and financial disaster taking place at Cairngorm. The information on which this post is based was obtained through Freedom of Information â?? it should have been in the public realm. The secrecy and failure of Natural Retreats and HIE to consult publicly before developing any new proposals helps explain why these misconceived plans have been developed.

The Pre-Planning Feasibility document describes the artificial slopes, which would be located above the car park in Coire Cas as follows:

> *The initial proposal is to install two slope areas â?? a beginners slope of approximately 30m long x 60m wide in plan view to suit the land/building constraints and alongside this to allow progression â?? an intermediate slope of approximately 60m x 30m in plan view.*
> *The beginnerâ??s area will be served by three Double sided QueueDodgerÂ® rope tow and the intermediate area served by a Doppelmayr Highline surface drag lift. The lifts would hold a*

maximum capacity of 135 people at any one time.

It is proposed that the slope should be constructed out of snowflex.



The impact on the landscape will be huge. No need to take my word for it, here is what the Cairngorm National Park Authority says:

Dry ski slope

The proposed ski slope is located in an elevated slope above the main car park. It faces the wildland area to the south and will be highly visible fro this. It will also be visible from areas to the west. It is likely to have a significant effect upon the landscape character due to the design and colours proposed. There will be a loss of habitat and natural vegetation which forms the 'envelope' surrounding the ski centre and which make an importa contribution to the character within Corrie Cas. There are many emerging trees within the area that though small are an important part of the fu landscape character of the area. (They may not be particularly young trees due to the climatic constraints.)

The car park is a starting point for many visitors to the hill. Many will be using the ski slopes in winter however many hill walkers set of from here throughout the year. They are a key visual receptor group with a high sensitivity for visual effects and effects on the special landscape qualities in p wildland and they must be weighted appropriately within the assessments. In addition there are many other visitors who come to experience a hig mountain landscape and will also be highly sensitive visual receptors. A view-shed diagram will be required and this must extend to a radius that in Monadhliath because of the brightness of the proposed colours.

Extract from email sent by CNPA to Highland Council 14th March

So a highly visible development from afar which will impact on all visitors to Coire Cas, whether constructed in white or green, the two colours available:



Not only that but the Scottish Environment Protection Agency believe it could have an unacceptable impact on the ecology of the area:

1. Disruption to wetlands including peatlands

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1.1 Groundwater dependent terrestrial ecosystems (GWDTE), which are types of wetlar specifically protected under the Water Framework Directive. Our GIS shows GWTD habitats (both moderate and highly dependent) in the areas of the ptarmigan buildin shieling garage building, both car parks, and in particular where the artificial ski slop (currently positioned on M16 wet heath) will potentially be sited.

1.6 We wish to highlight at this stage that there may be the need for alternative loc elements of the proposal particularly the artificial ski slope, or micro siting or m to the likely presence of GWDTE.

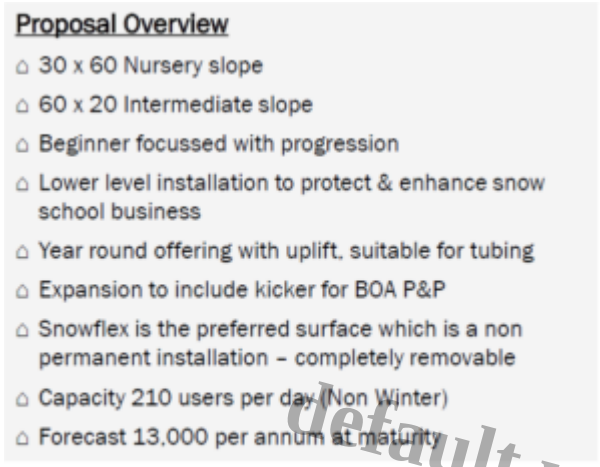
Extracts from SEPA letter to Highland Council dated 23rd March

The location is also wrong in terms of the logic of the pre-planning feasibility study which states there is a need to:

â??Protect snow school operations in the winter and create a year round snow school offeringâ?•

Anyone who visits the Coire Cas Car Park regularly will know its extremely exposed to the wind. There is probably not a more exposed, and therefore worse location, for a low down artificial ski slope anywhere on the mountain. How could any snow school use this year round?

The justification for Natural Retreatsâ?? proposal is wrong



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A kicker is a soft landing area below a jump

Natural Retreats is proposing the slope should be constructed out of snowflex:

> *Unlike â??dryâ?• slopes, the friction is reduced through the misting of water across the slopes during operation. This uses the BritonMistÂ® slope lubrication system including a fully engineered water treatment and filtration systems for slope cleaning. This system also has a fully engineered water recycling system*

Hereâ??s the justification from Natural Retreatsâ?? pre-planning feasibility study:

> *3 ARTIFICIAL SKI SLOPE PROPOSAL*
> *In line with the intention to increase family focussed facilities, whilst also protecting snow school revenues and establishing a snow school operation all year round, plans have been developed to introduce a beginners and intermediate, artificial ski slope. This would be located close to the base station, in a more protected area improving beginner experience and allowing lessons to take place when the rest of the ski area may be closed due to adverse weather.*

A â??more protected areaâ?• indeed!

What Natural Retreats have not told explained in the documentation obtained through FOI, and apparently agreed by HIE, is:

> How the lubrication system will work in freezing conditions? It wonâ??t, so no beginners area therefore when its cold on the mountain but there is no snow.
>
> Whether the artificial slope can be used when there is snow on it? You cannot use piste machines on snow flex so as soon as it snows, it is likely to become unusable
>
> The impact of the piping system on the ground vegetation and soils. The documentation claims that snow flex can be easily removed but due to the piping system this is unlikely to be the case.
>
> The basis for their claim that snowflex is the cheapest and most environmentally friendly option (the misting system is likely to make it more expensive to both construct and operate).

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If HIE donâ??t want to take my word for this, perhaps they should start asking why Midlothian Council chose a totally different material, Neveplast, for the outdoor slope at Hillend:

> *The new ski slopes, 1.100 square metres in total, will be realized with Neveplast NP30 product. After a careful evaluation and testing of different materials the local council has opted for Neveplast surface which met all the guarantees required by the customer: Neveplast NP30 has been chosen among several competitors thanks to its unique properties of slipperiness, excellent lateral grip, low maintenance costs (no irrigation and drainage systems needed), the possibility to use the same equipment used on the snow, high safety standards, and for its extraordinary durability.*

Natural Retreatsâ?? useage figures in the Proposal Overview also raise interesting questions. 13,000 users a year comes to 35.6 users on average per day â?? a very low figure compared to the stated capacity of 210 users a day in summer and hardly viable (its about 4 people an hour). This suggests that Natural Retreats may have already decided that its not going to operate the artificial slope for much of the year or realises that the slope will be inoperable for much of the winter (for the reasons explained above). All the more reason that any business case for this investment by HIE should be made fully public.

The feasibility study claims there are at present *â??210,000 annual visitors (120,000 in winter and 90,000 in summer) with vast potential to increasesâ?•*. Its pretty clear that the vast increase is not going to come from the artificial slope. I believe this is right because:

- the potential attraction of an artificial beginners area low down on Cairngorm (â??family focussed facilitiesâ?•) is that parents could leave children there when there is insufficient snow on nursery slopes and go off skiing. If the artificial slope cannot be used, because it is so poorly located and constructed out of the wrong materials, the slope loses its purpose.
- the same arguments apply in summer, why would families bring children to learn on an artificial slope, when there is little else for them to do? I guess Natural Retreats are hoping parents might leave their children while they take a trip up the funicular but there is no evidence to suggest that will happen. Where are the visitor surveys to inform the business case?

What then is the economic justification for this artificial slope? HIE needs to explain itself and why it has apparently agreed to give Natural Retreats yet more public money for something so poorly thought out.

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What a proper case for an artificial ski slope at Cairngorm might look like?

There is a case for an artificial ski slope at Cairngorms which has been developed by the Save the Ciste Campaign http://savetheciste.com/campaign/ as part of its proposals to renew facilities in Coire na Ciste. Its well worth while having a look at their photos which show that in the last winter, skiing would have been possible in Coire na Ciste, when it wasnâ??t elsewhere in the mountain. The contrast between the StC proposals and those of Natural Retreats are striking:

- their proposed artificial slope is on the west side of the Coire, facing east, out of the prevailing wind and generally sheltered.
- their proposal artificial slope is tucked away and therefore would have far less impact on the landscape
- their proposed slope is constructed out of neveplast, which can be used in snow, and can be pisted by machines, meaning it could be used throughout the winter.

There are still questions to be asked of course about the StC proposals, the impact of an artificial slope on the ecology of Coire na Ciste and whether it really could attract year round use, but what HIE and the public need to note is that a small voluntary group of skiing enthusiasts has produced a far more coherent proposal than Natural Retreats. Another reason to add to why HIE should terminate its lease with Natural Retreats and get them off the mountain.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. HIE
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