

The lack of investment at Cairngorm and what it says about HIE and Natural Retreats

Description



The Fiacail t-bar dump in 2016



The Fiacail t-bar dump in July 2017

An t-Aonach on Cairn Gorm
yesterday, Sunday the 19th March
2017. #HIE



Image from Save Cairngorm Facebook
Page

Over the last fifteen months Parkswatch has highlighted the lack of maintenance and rubbish at Cairngorm, one of the worst examples being the dump at the former Fiacail T-Bar. This was originally justified as a temporary holding area for old fence posts which were supposed to be removed in the winter season but never were. Instead, Natural Retreats started to burn fence posts in skips on the mountain (left) and added materials to the dump.

With Natural Retreats seemingly immune to any adverse publicity, Save the Ciste group activist George Paton wrote to Highlands and Islands Enterprise on 21st June pointing out the temporary dump had been growing for 18 months and that “if little Johnny was injured or worse” they would ultimately be held responsible. Here is the response:

30th June

Dear Mr Paton

Your email of 21 June 2017 to my colleague Keith Bryers, has been passed on to me, as HIE’s Customer Service Improvement Manager, for response.

Health and safety within the Cairngorm Estate is, naturally, of paramount importance, both for HIE as landowner, and CML [Cairngorm Mountain Ltd] as operator of the visitor facilities. HIE staff meet CML regularly to monitor performance on a broad range of operational issues, including safety.

With regard to your specific concerns about the present conditions in the Fiacail T Bar area, our understanding is that this location is being used temporarily to store materials while current maintenance works are progressing. We have already discussed this issue with CML and will raise it again, both to be assured on health and safety matters, and to ensure that the area is tidied as soon as is practicable.

Playing the Health and Safety card appears to have worked because in the last few days (see photos above) Natural Retreats has started to clear the Fiacail T-bar area. Well done George, it shows how activists can make a difference.

The downside is that at present it appears the only way to get HIE to act at Cairngorm is threaten them with Health and Safety. The test in this case will be whether, having tidied up the site and made it “safe”, HIE stop Natural Retreats using it as a dump and get them to remove the concrete plinth which formed part of the t-bar structure. I have my doubts. HIE, like many other public authorities, is far more interested in large new capital vanity projects than in restoring sites affected by past developments or in basic maintenance. What Cairngorm needs first and foremost is some attention to basics and all the evidence shows this is not happening.

Natural Retreats’ failure to develop an environmental plan or standards for Cairngorm

Last year, after parkswatch drew attention to the lack of any proper environmental management plan at Cairngorm ([see here](#)) CNPA staff wrote to Natural Retreats urging that they develop a set of standards for operating at Cairngorm. This request was repeated by the CNPA Convener of Planning, Eleanor Mackintosh, in a letter ([see here – thanks to George Paton who obtained it through FOI](#)) to Natural Retreats dated 14/2/17:

“I would also urge you to develop some simple, best-practice management standards for your operations that you can consistently apply to your own works or those undertaken by contractors”.

Actually, there is no need for Natural Retreats to develop new best practice standards, because these already exist. What they should have been doing, in consultation with conservation and recreational interests, is to review and update standards for the management of ski areas which were developed back in the 1980s ([see here](#)) as well as those developed during the construction of the funicular. It

has suited HIE to forget this history, the lessons from the past and, if there is one thing CNPA should be doing at present, its to demand that these lessons are incorporated into new standards.

Where Eleanor Mackintosh got it wrong, I believe, was to suggest to Natural Retreats that the management standards should be “simple”. Cairngorm is a complex mountain environment and the examples of best practice that have been developed over time range from the simple to the highly complex depending on what is proposed. To apply best practice standards consistently and appropriately would require the types of skill and expertise which are sadly lacking among managers at both at Natural Retreats and HIE.

The crumbling environs of the Day Lodge



Clearing up the Fiacaill dump takes very little effort or money, it could all be done in a day. That it has taken so long tells you something about the way Cairngorm is being managed. Its not just the natural environment that is being mismanaged though, the state of the buildings at Cairngorm tells a similar story, as these recent photos from around the Day Lodge show.



Before Natural Retreats bought Cairngorm Mountain Ltd from HIE, they were paid a sum, which I understand was c£600k, to cover delapidation works to buildings. A sad indictment of HIE's failure to maintain the buildings at Cairngorm during the period 2008-2014 when it had direct control. This money appears to have been either insufficient or has not been spent by Natural Retreats as intended.



The failure

to carry out basic maintenance and repairs is a UK wide phenomenon. The powers that be, in both public and private sectors, would prefer to let buildings collapse and then build new ones, rather than spend any money on maintenance. Money spent on maintenance though not only improves amenity – what message do these photos give to visitors to Cairngorm? – it helps create local jobs. Natural Retreats appears though to have no interest in investing in the things that matter at Cairngorm but would rather be involved in grandiose new projects financed by the public sector.



Under the terms of HIE's lease, Natural Retreats are supposed to maintain buildings in a reasonable state of repair and has to contribute to both a Buildings Sinking Fund and Asset Replacement Fund. It would be in the public interest that Natural Retreats' contributions to these funds (they were supposed to pay £11k to the ARF in March 2016 and £27k in March 2017) and expenditure from them are made public – I will ask!



How long before a visitor trips on this edge and sues Natural Retreats?

I suspect Natural Retreats will only maintain the built environment around the Day Lodge when forced to do so for health and safety reasons – if I was their insurers I would be upping their premiums. It shouldn't need health and safety though for basic maintenance and care of buildings to take place at Cairngorm, it just needs an owner and operator that cares about the place. Unfortunately all the evidence shows that neither HIE or Natural Retreats care and, while activists need to press for improvements at Cairngorm, the only long-term solution is for the land to be taken away from HIE and transferred to an organisation that does have the interests of the mountain and the people at its heart.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. HIE
3. natural retreats
4. restoration

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