

The continued destruction at Cairngorm and why its happening

Description

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My thanks to Alan Mackay for sending me photos of the current works to remove the West Wall chairlift. Save the Ciste Facebook pages. The photos were taken on Wednesday. The concrete behind the chairlift.
Photo Credit Alan Mackay

On Monday works started to remove the West Wall chairlift. These demonstrate yet again that both Natural Retreats and HIE are totally unfit to manage Cairngorm. This is not just because of the environmental damage they are causing, its because the works appear deliberately designed to frustrate any chance of alternative development in Coire Cas or takeover by the local community. Since my post in May [All quiet at Cairngorm?](#) it turns out that HIE has been hatching a plan not just to clear up the mess and redundant infrastructure at Cairngorm – which has been sorely needed – but also to remove other infrastructure that could have been salvaged and used to develop an alternative plan for the mountain. There has been no consultation.

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Damage to vegetation caused by removal of former chairlift tower. The Consultant's email to the Nat remove the West Wall chairlift would be done by hand tools and removed by helicopter. The photos

We only know of what is going on because of an FOI request made at the end of June by George Paton asking for all correspondence between the Cairngorms National Park Authority, Natural Retreats and HIE about redundant infrastructure at Cairngorm. At the end of July the CNPA sent him two small files with extracts from emails [\(see here\)](#) and [\(here\)](#) which contained proposals for what was called the Cairngorm Mountain Clear Up project:

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The proposals are to:-

1. Demolish the derelict Coire na Ciste café/treatment works (demolition was consented in 2011) sought in due course as it now appears that there is a station currently within the building.
2. Remove remaining parts of ski-tows (previous bases), White Lady T-bar (3 plinths, 12 bases) and A...
3. Remove Coire na Ciste - the lower of the two chairlift - the higher of the two - (12 steel towers and ramps, decking, huts etc at both).
4. It is proposed to reduce concrete bases to a foundation (which would substantially increase the damage footprint and create the need to import a s... base area would be landscaped using sensitively gat...
5. Remove old safety circuit cabling from rem...
6. Remove damaged or redundant snow-fenci...
7. Demolish/dismantle by a mixture of mobile (with low pressure tyres) used on the more accessible Coire na Ciste chairlift) and smaller hand-operated tools at the chairlift).
8. Airlift all arisings (concrete, steel, steel cabling) to the Coire na Ciste car park and then take them to th...

This set the alarm bells ringing because the proposals were far more than a clear-up, they are about removing all the infrastructure not currently in use. As a result George, who formerly worked in civil engineering and knows how these things work, asked HIE for a copy of the engineering report into the Coire na Ciste infrastructure. He received this report [Ciste chair bases report \(2\)](#) on 15th August (about which more anon).

Besides the works listed in the email, the evidence on the ground suggests the clear-up also appears to cover the removal of accumulated debris at Cairngorm, which Parkswatch has been calling for for over 18 months – a good thing.



Fiacail dump December 2016 Photo
Credit Alan Bratney



and two weeks ago.....

After all the criticism over the last 18 months about the mess and delapidation at Cairngorm, HIE have at last taken action. Its worth noting from the FOI response that HIE appears to be paying for ALL the clear-up, i.e this is being paid for out of public funds, while Natural Retreats appears to be contributing nothing.

The environmental damage being created by the clear-up

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It worth repeating, the email from the Consultant to the CNPA said that only hand tools would be used
Chairlift Photo Credit Alan Mackay

Unfortunately, but predictably, the clear-up is causing as much new damage as it removes. The public purse is in effect paying for yet more damage at Cairngorm. This is wrong.

It also makes a complete mockery of the planning system. Regular readers will recall that when Highland Council granted planning permission to Natural Retreats to move the West Wall poma return wheel that a condition of the planning permission was that specific measures should be taken to protect the environment ([see here](#)). While these were never properly observed and while Highland Council, who had granted the planning permission failed to take any enforcement action, in order to get Planning Permission all the public authorities involved had at least to nod their heads towards the need to protect the fragile mountain environment.

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No protective measures and use of diggers rather than hand tools – Photo credit Alan Mackay

However, removal of redundant infrastructure did not require planning permission and therefore there was no legal requirement on HIE or Natural Retreats to produce a document setting out the standards they would use to carry out the works. We know from the FOI response that Gavin Miles the Head of Planning had suggested to the planning consultant (who was working on behalf of Natural Retreats/Cairngorm Mountain Ltd) that: *“it would be sensible good practice to consult CNPA on the components that don’t require planning consent”*. This doesn’t appear to have happened.

This has created the anomalous and scandalous situation that new developments at Cairngorm (in theory) have to abide by the highest standards (in order to win planning consent) with reams of associated paperwork but removal of old developments can be done any old how.

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Damage to edges of existing track by vehicles which appear to be driving out the demolition material report (point 8) stated the materials would be airlifted out.

Indeed, Natural Retreats included in their brief for the proposed extension of the Ptarmigan Restaurant that all works would be carried out with minimum impact to the environment. Meantime, just a few hundred metres away they have allowed works to be carried out with absolutely NO measures being taken to protect soil and vegetation and contrary to how their consultant said they would be done.

This is what I mean by the planning system being brought into utter disrepute. It should be obvious now to CNPA that Natural Retreats cannot be trusted to do anything the way they say they will and it is essential therefore that they reject any new proposals for the Ptarmigan or anywhere else on the mountain which comes from Natural Retreats. If they had the courage, the CNPA would also call on the Scottish Government to bring removal of infrastructure in fragile mountain areas within the scope of the planning system.

Why the new environmental damage at Cairngorm should not be a surprise

The consultant whom Natural Retreats engaged to work on the clear-up and wrote to CNPA was a certain Colin Matthew. He had previously been employed by Cairngorm Mountain Ltd but was made redundant by Natural Retreats. Last year, while still in employment, he was one of the operational managers at Cairngorm. This was at the time all the damage was being caused at the Shieling and West Wall. Perhaps he didn't have any responsibility for managing that or for all the mess that had been left on the mountain, but I think HIE needs to answer a whole lot of questions about why they allowed Natural Retreats to engage him to develop the clear-up proposals.

Even more surprising is the contractor which appears to have appointed to carry out the works at West Wall (I have asked for all the procurement information in an FOI).



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McGowan was the contractor who conducted all the unlawful work which took place during the construction of the Shieling Rope Tow (see below). How HIE could agree to their ever being appointed again to work at Cairngorm, I don't know..



The destruction of ski infrastructure in Coire na Ciste

I will not here go into detail about the removal of ski infrastructure from Coire na Ciste. The Save the Ciste Group has issued an excellent statement which should be read by everyone who cares about skiing and outdoor recreation at Cairngorm [STC Statement 25 Aug 2017.docx](#).

No-one would dispute that some of the old infrastructure at Cairngorm, such as the buildings at the bottom of Coire na Ciste which are beyond repair, needs to be removed. However, both HIE and Natural Retreats are fully aware of Save the Ciste Group's alternative plan for Coire na Ciste. This could potentially have used some of the redundant infrastructure, including the concrete plinths identified as still being in a safe condition (see FOI above). However, instead of consulting Save the Ciste and other ski interests about this HIE has provided what appears to be large amounts of public money (according to STC its £267,000) to smash everything up and therefore make any re-use of

equipment possible. It would have cost nothing to consult but that is not how HIE works.

Getting planning permission to put in new infrastructure is far more complex and costly than applying to upgrade existing infrastructure as both HIE and Natural Retreats know from the recabling work they did last year at Cairngorm. One is left with the nasty feeling that the whole clear-up scheme has been designed to make a community take-over as difficult as possible. If so, it appears the current clear-up at Cairngorm is not inspired by the need to protect the mountain environment at Cairngorm, its all about HIE and Natural Retreats using public money to protect their own interests.

What needs to happen

On Friday I wrote to Charlotte Wright, Chief Executive of HIE asking her to intervene and stop all work at Cairngorm and to account for what has gone wrong [email Charlotte Wright 170825](#). I copied the email to the Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Roseanna Cunningham, and Cabinet Secretary responsible for HIE, and thus for the mismanagement of Cairngorm, Fergus Ewing. I think they need to intervene and develop a plan in consultation with the local community, recreation and conservation interests and other public authorities to remove the Cairngorm Estate from HIE as soon as possible.

The other thing we need is an overall plan for Cairngorm. There is none. The so called Masterplan is simply a proposal for two developments. HIE have not explained at all how the current operations fit into a longer term plan. Scottish Ministers should require them to consult on development of a long-term plan for the whole area before anything else happens.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. HIE
4. natural retreats
5. planning

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Author

nickkempe