

Crunch time at Cairngorm – launch of community buyout

Description



The concrete foundations of ski tows removed by truck from Coire na Ciste

The work funded by HIE to remove the ski infrastructure from Coire na Ciste, using trucks, has progressed apace in the last week. The sheer amount of rubble pictured above provides evidence of the number of truck journeys that have been made up and down the mountain to the West Wall area without protective measures being taken ([see here](#)). The Cairngorms National Park Authority were told hand tools would be used to undertake this work (judging by the amount of concrete this was never a remote possibility) and that the material would be removed by helicopter.

Further evidence has now become available to show the removal of the ski infrastructure has nothing to do with the need to clear up Cairngorm. In their response to a Freedom of Information request on what they planned to spend at Cairngorm (which has been forwarded to Parkswatchscotland) HIE included this:

Demolition of the Coire na Ciste café subject to funding; no price or programme yet.

In other words the £267k which HIE appears to have secretly awarded to McGowan to remove former ski lifts and snow fencing does NOT include the demolition of the Ciste Cafe, the biggest eyesore on the whole of Cairngorm.



On Tuesday HIE, which had up till now remained silent about the destruction going on at Cairngorm (I have still not even had an acknowledgement from their new Chief Executive, Charlotte Wright, asking for the “work” to be halted) put out a news release headed “CairnGorm Mountain clear up works” ([see here](#)). This claimed that *“The removal of disused and decaying installations will enhance the appearance of the Mountain during the majority of the year when there is no snow. In turn this will improve the experience of non-skiing visitors, an important market in making CairnGorm a year-round visitor attraction.”* So why then, if the experience of non-skiing visitors is so important, has HIE

prioritised the removal of former ski infrastructure from Coire na Ciste? This is hidden from the mass of visitors who go to Coire Cas whereas the former Coire na Ciste Cafe blights the Ciste car park and is the one bit of Ciste infrastructure visitors are likely to see.

HIE has tried to defend the indefensible by saying they are leaving the lift wiring in Coire na Ciste in place. This is undermined by their statement that *“The potential reinstatement of mechanised ski uplift in Coire na Ciste is to be one of the options examined in the review of the infrastructure at CairnGorm due to be commissioned by HIE once the tender process has been completed.”* So, why would HIE want to remove ALL the ski infrastructure (except the wiring and some of the fences in better condition) from Coire na Ciste *BEFORE* it completed a full review of infrastructure at Cairngorm?

What's more the news release states: *“Other remnants including concrete bases at the former White Lady T-Bar, Aonach Poma and Fiacail T-Bar lift lines are also being removed with the project set to be completed in Summer 2018.”* This strongly suggests that the old infrastructure in Coire Cas, which really does blight the visitor experience and can be seen by anyone on HIE's white elephant funicular, is not going to be removed until next year.

default watermark



The former White Lady t-bar base and associated mess as it appeared in August 2017 can clearly be seen from the funicular (top right).

In response to public criticism of the removal of snow fencing in the Ciste – which makes off-pisteskiing there possible for much longer periods – HIE claims that *“The stretches of snow fencing that are still in good condition will continue to serve skiers and the programme of fencing renewal will continue”*. They make no mention of the fact that the one thing Natural Retreats is supposed to be responsible for funding at Cairngorm is the replacement of the old chestnut ski fencing (this was confirmed in an FOI response to George Paton last year *“o/ All Fencing Timber. Tenant’s responsibility”*). So, why then would HIE be paying McGowan to remove snow fencing from Coire na Ciste when it appears that Natural Retreats could have been replacing this?

All of this provides yet more evidence that the most likely explanation for the destruction of the skiing infrastructure at Cairngorm is that HIE and Natural Retreats wish to try and undermine the alternative proposals that have been developed by the Coire na Ciste group [STC Statement 25 Aug 2017.docx](#). In other words, the alleged “clear-up” at Cairngorm is purely about the self-interest of HIE and Natural Retreats and has little to do with the interests of the local community or recreational visitors, let alone the landscape.

The evidence shows HIE cannot be trusted to undertake a proper review of the uplift infrastructure at Cairngorm. Its unclear at present how much money they intended to spend on this but luckily there is now an option to spend it differently.

Community need to give buyout bid it's chance

THE proposed Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust community buyout bid of the Cairngorm Estate is undoubtedly ambitious in scale.

But then major changes require grand plans.

There is widespread and genuine concern that the wintersports operation at CairnGorm Mountain is being dismantled bit and bit – and to be fair to Natural Retreats that long precedes their arrival.

Unfortunately the current operator does not have the will or the finances to turn this around, and their focus is on creating an all-year round destination.

That's what we want too but all-year round has to mean supporting the winter operation and infrastructure and clearly that has not been the case since the opening of funicular in 2001.

Many skiers and snowboarders are left wondering what uplift is going to be lost next as landlords Highlands and Islands Enterprise continues to oversee the decline of snowsports.

In Coire na Ciste, there is only the West Wall Poma left to serve the best area of skiing at CairnGorm Mountain which includes Number One and Number Two gullies on the East Wall as well as the Ciste Gully itself.

Figures from campaign group Save the Ciste show that in 2010 that there were 180 days when the Ciste Gully was skiable to the old chairlift boardwalk and the West Wall Poma operated on 57 days (32 per cent)

In the 2014 season the Ciste Gully was skiable to the chairlift boardwalk for 131 days but the West Wall Poma only operated on 14 days (11 per cent). Sadly the figures for the past two winter seasons are likely to be even less than these miserable numbers.

CairnGorm Mountain is a pale imitation of itself in winter time especially for intermediate and above skiers because half of the resort is effectively now out of bounds.

We are not against Natural Retreats – we would in fact love for them to flourish on the hill as that can only be good news for everyone associated with the strath.

But we as frustrated as many other people at seeing the beloved skiing and snowboarding on CairnGorm Mountain systematically eroded and public money being put to other uses on the hill.

CairnGorm Mountain is a very important part of what makes the strath so special. It is the reason why so many people came here and ended up leaving down roots.

Aviemore and Glenmore launched an ambitious bid to buy the Cairngorm Estate from HIE under the Community Empowerment legislation (see left). The Scottish Government says it supports Community Empowerment – well, here is a test for them then. Why not instruct HIE:

- a) to give the money they would have spent reviewing lift infrastructure to the local community to undertake an independent review in conjunction with downhill and off-piste skiers
- b) halt the proposals to develop a dry ski slope at Cairngorm (the proposed development would in any case pre-empt the review of ski infrastructure)?

The launch of a local community buy-out at Cairngorm will also be a test of the mettle of the Cairngorms National Park Authority. In the new National Park Partnership Plan agreed by Ministers earlier this year, were some fine words about empowering local communities which however contained no concrete commitment to assist local communities to take over land. The launch of the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust provides them with an opportunity not only to show they are prepared to put words into action, it would also allow them to address the ongoing destruction at Cairngorm.

The problem the CNPA faces at present is not just that the convention is that public authorities should not criticise each other in public, whatever the behaviour of the other agency (which might explain some of their silence about what is going on at Cairngorm) its one of Ministerial power. Fergus Ewing, the Minister responsible for HIE and Rural Affairs, has until now appeared all powerful and has been a strong supporter of both the funicular and the An Camas Mor Development. By comparison, his ministerial counterpart, Roseanna Cunningham, who is responsible for the environment and National Parks has appeared weak. However she has in the past made strong noises about supporting community buyouts and this might just provide her, the CNPA and everyone who cares about the future of Cairngorm the means to put an end to HIE's mismanagement.

Category

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Tags

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- 2. HIE
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