

An Camas Mor, rewilding or new town in the Cairngorms?

Description

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Old pine tree surrounded by regeneration at An Camus Mor, isn't this what our National Parks are for?

Large developments are, I believe, fundamentally incompatible with the whole concept of National Parks, wherever they are located across the world. National Parks are places where the natural environment should come first, not second. That's why I, like many people, object to the An Camas Mor development in principle. We should not be building new towns in the Cairngorms, whether or not these impact on protected European sites or have implications for access by visitors ([see here](#)).

That does not mean I am against new housing in our National Parks, indeed there is a crying need for social housing in the Cairngorms, but this must be of an appropriate scale and appropriately situated. The Government should visit An Camas Mor and see for themselves. No housing, whatever the size of the development.



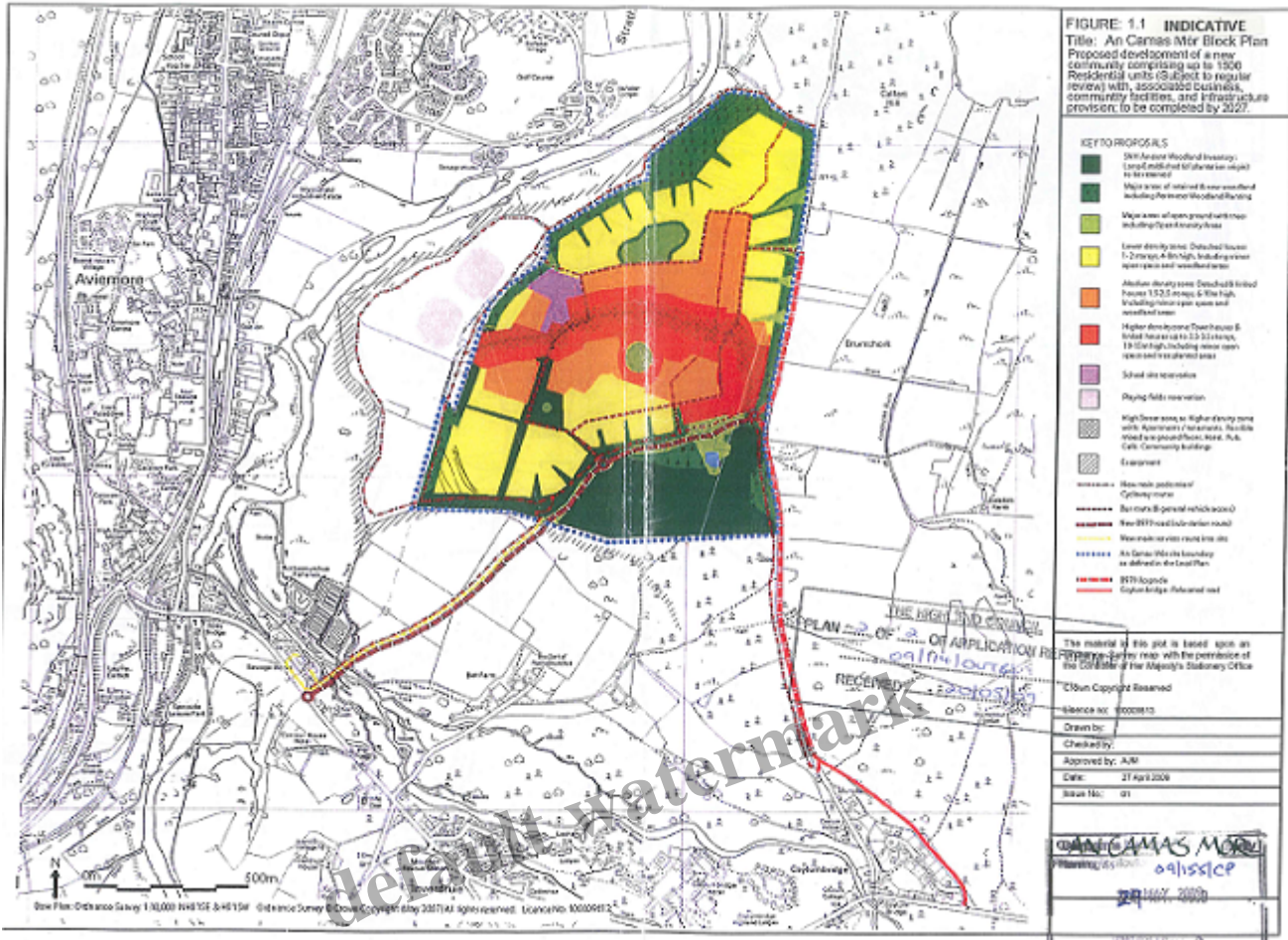
Earlier this week a reader expressed scepticism that the

pole (left hand photo) could mark the centre of the proposed development. I can well understand why, the location is beautiful and unspoilt, just the sort of place our National Parks were set up to protect. I was shocked too when I visited two weeks ago and very quickly started asking myself how could the Cairngorms National Park Authority ever have consented to a development here?



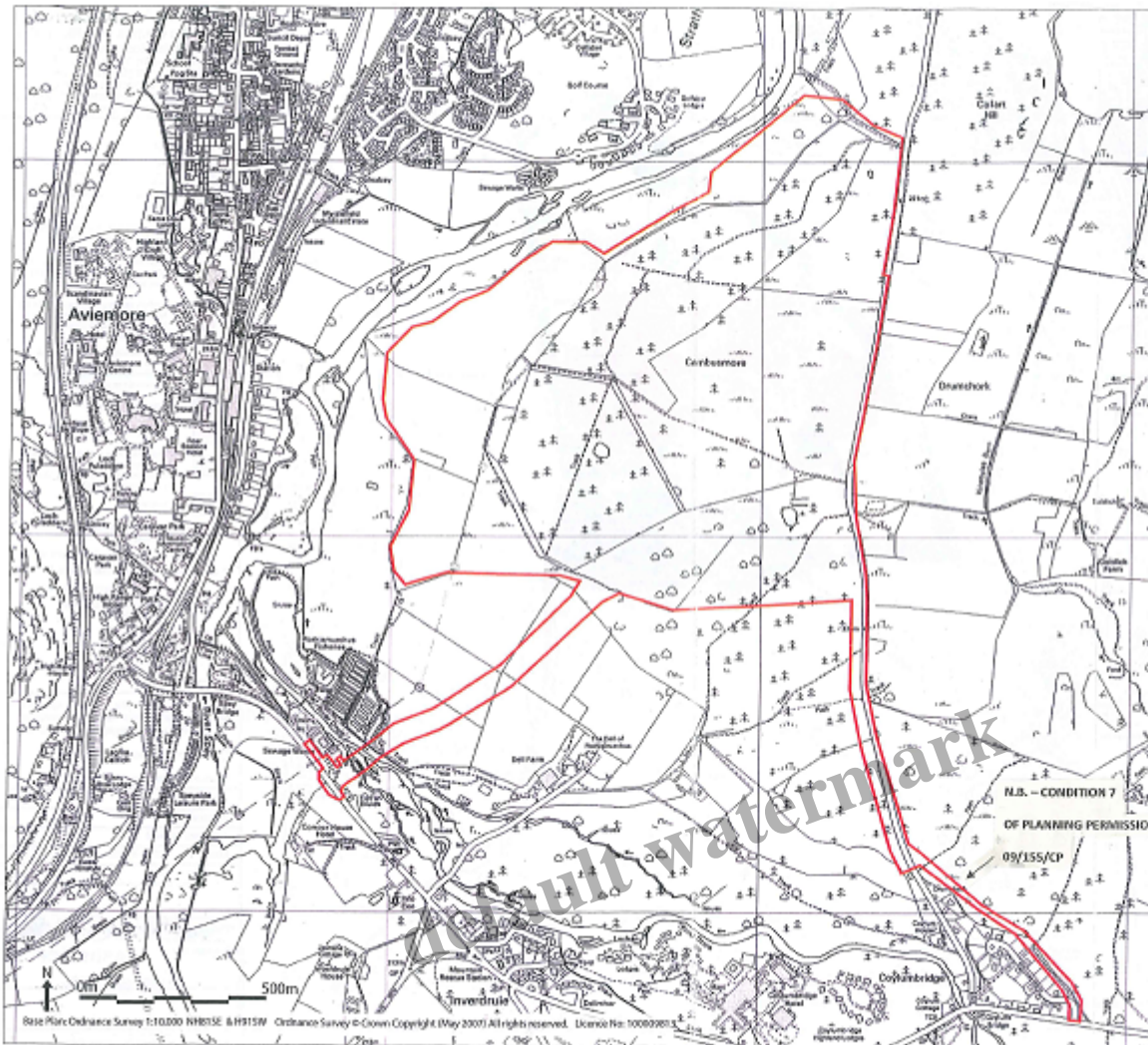
Looking north towards the pole which marks the centre of the development. The Caledonian forest h is regenerating over heathland and rough pasture.

The most intensive building is proposed for the centre of the development in the areas marked red on the map below (the pole in the photos marks as I understand it the centre of the green circle on the map). The approved development proposals include buildings 3.5 storeys high. If you can see the Lairig Ghru from ground level at the centre of An Camus Mor, its quite obvious it will have a major impact on the landscape of Glenmore. Indeed, the impact of the development on the landscape was one of the reasons why the CNPA imposed the condition that the development could be halted after 630 houses had been built. The removal of that condition was the key change approved by the CNPA when it agreed to vary the original planning application this August.



Extract from CNPA committee report August 2017

After my visit to the site, I believe the map in the Committee report showing the boundary of the site and dating from 2009 is totally misleading.



AN CAMAS MÒR APPLICATION SITE PLAN

KEY
Application site

Calgornie National Park Authority
Planning Application No. 09/155/CP
29 MAY 2009
REGISTERED

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL
PLAN 1 OF 2 OF APPLICATION REF
09/114/OUT/83
RECEIVED 20/05/09

GABTA 01/05/2009

Much of the the east side of the site (left of the red line along the road, the B970, is depicted as rough grassland. Its not, its regenerating Caledonian pine forest. This is partially acknowledged by the Developer who describes the part of the site where houses will be built as “elevated woodland” – while carefully avoiding the term “Caledonian pine forest”!



This photo, from the planning papers, clearly shows that An Camas Mor is mainly woodland. You need to appreciate that a large proportion of it is regenerating Caledonian pine forest.

Unsurprisingly, in order to sell the development, those acting on behalf of Johnnie Grant, the landowner, included plenty of illustrations from Gehl, world renowned architects, of what the built environment might look like (and numerous sustainability features) rather than showing what the new town would replace. Unfortunately very few people apart from quad bikers visit the site and experience for themselves what the developers are wanting to destroy. I think if they did, there would be an uproar. Yes, Gehl's designs may be world-leading but these should be used for a new town somewhere else where they could be a credit to Scotland, not in a National Park. While the CNPA Board did visit the site before taking their decision, they were transported along a track by minibus – not the best way to see what it is really like.



One of the kettle holes on site, formed by the melting of the Glenmore glacier and home to rich wildlife including the Northern Damselfly. The developers have now apparently agreed not to destroy these kettle holes, but we saw signs of recent works on the far bank.

An Camas Mor has had a variety of uses. Parts have been and still are used for grazing cattle (which

probably explains open nature of woodland in photo above) and parts have been planted (with grant aid). In ecological terms however, much of the soil structure appears to be intact, which helps explain why, with trees regenerating, so much wildlife has now been recorded on the site.



Regenerating birch in Scots pine plantation



Granny pine in Scots pine plantation

Even where trees have been planted and the land ploughed, there has been regeneration, while old pines have been preserved. On my visit I saw Osprey, Red Squirrel, signs of badger and otter as well as rare fungi and various creepy crawlies (you can see excellent photos on the Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group flickr album [\(see here\)](#)).



Regenerating woodland on the southern edge of the proposed development looking west to Aviemore

An Camas Mor, rewilding and the Cairngorms National Park

An Camas Mor is not pristine, one reason why its not so far been designated as a protected nature site, and there are plenty of signs of poor management.





Drain creation, Rothiemurchus style



This “forest” track was widened to provide access just prior to a pop concert a few years ago.



Eyesores from previous land-use remain

However, it is re-wilding. Paradoxically one of the reasons for this is the proposed new town. An Camas Mor has been left alone, allowing natural processes to take hold, while the land round about is intensively used.



Looking south from An Camas Mor across intensively farmed fields

From what I have learned though, An Camas Mor always had this re-wilding potential, because although partly abandoned now, much of it was never intensively used. It is therefore just the sort of area that the National Park should have earmarked for regeneration and extension of the Caledonian pine forest.

The CNPA however appears to have turned a blind eye to the re-wilding potential and to have reached the wrong conclusion about the validity of the Environmental Statements accompanying the planning application:

92. The applicant has submitted a statement of validity for the Environmental Statement (ES) submitted with the original planning application to demonstrate that it remains a robust evidence base on which to make decisions. The records present on the site have been added to as the applicant's team and others have undertaken further survey work. There has been no significant change at Camas Mòr site itself since the previous planning consent was issued. As the application is for the same development proposal, there is no more evidence or proposals that can be assessed. The predicted impacts on Landscape are unchanged.
93. The single issue that has changed substantially since the original decision is our understanding of impacts of recreation on capercaillie. Badenoch and Strathspey are the UK's stronghold for the species with 83% of the total population. The Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and associated woodland habitat. The fact that capercaillie avoid using woodland that is used by people, potentially reduces habitat available to them.

Extract from Committee Report

The reason that the records of species found at An Camas Mor has increased is not just because there has been more recording – and part of the credit for that goes to the Badenoch and Strathspey conservation group rather than the developer – it's because as a result of rewilding the wildlife on the site is improving the whole time. The longer it's left, the more will be found. If the CNPA had insisted on proper surveys for the most recent application and compared these to all the species it has prioritised for protection in the National Park, it would have had lots of reasons not to agree to this development going ahead.

Unfortunately, the CNPA at present appears to give little priority to rewilding. Our National Parks, which could have offered a means to re-wild parts of Scotland, have not had the drive or will to promote the potential of nature against the interests and wishes of landowners. Meantime, apart from national nature reserves none of our other nature conservation designations – a major flaw – can be used to restore nature to places. Our designation system is focussed on protecting what is there, not what could be. We sorely need a means to promote re-wilding which is not entirely dependent on the goodwill of the landowner.

If Anders Povlsen, who is doing so much to re-wild Glen Feshie, or the RSPB rather than Johnnie Grant had owned this land, I think it would be being quietly promoted as one of the jewels in the Cairngorms. From a conservation perspective, the Scottish Government would have been far better giving Johnnie Grant £7.2m to buy up An Camas Mor than buying part of the Rothiemurchus Estate ([see here](#)), which was already fully protected.

While both the Scottish Government and the CNPA know that An Camas Mor sits at the centre of the main areas of woodland where Capercaillie now survive, they have seen the challenge as being to find ways to let the development go ahead without impacting too much on capercaillie. Hence the detailed Habitats Regulations Assessment and mitigation proposals for An Camas Mor which, if enforced, will inevitably restrict access. They could and should have looked at this from a completely different viewpoint. What is the rewilding potential of An Camas Mor and what role could it play in saving the capercaillie (once again) from extinction in Scotland?

I have asked Gus Jones, convener of the Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group why there are not capercaillie in the woods? The first reason he gave is recreational use, and by that he did not mean walkers (I did not see another walker in two hours on what was an English bank holiday) but the use of the forest for quad biking.



The people quad biking were very nice, obviously enjoying themselves and I even heard the tour leader had stopped everyone at a particular point, explain the orange marks on some trees marked those to be removed and this was being done to improve ground flora in the woods. How this fitted with the proposed development was not clear.

am not sure!

The second is that part of An Camas Mor is used for pheasant breeding.



While specific, let alone conclusive research, is lacking, even the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust ([see here](#)) admits that pheasant rearing can lead to competition for food and drive other game birds (in which they include capercaillie) from the most intensively used areas while also attracting predators.

Now I am not against either quad biking or pheasant rearing, in the right place. However, given the current parlous state of capercaillie, surely what the CNPA should be doing is engaging with relevant interests to help capercaillie re-colonise this site (and other such woods)? This should include, if necessary, helping the current businesses relocate (if An Camas Mor goes ahead they will be finished in any case).

In a previous post ([see here](#)) I argued we need an alternative plan for An Camas Mor and this could be funded by the money which the Scottish Government apparently intends to invest in the development. Having had a good look at the site, I believe the core of an alternative plan for An Camas Mor should be about how we can allow it to continue to rewild. That would not cost much in

itself: narrow a few tracks to footpaths, restore other damage, remove human artefacts and rubbish and then leave nature take over.. It would then leave plenty of money to develop social housing elsewhere.

The only problem? Landownership and how to change who controls the land.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. landed estates
3. natural environment
4. planning
5. Scottish Government
6. secrecy

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