The local community or HIE â?? who is better able to manage Cairngorm?

Description

Highlands and Islands Enterprise are currently in serious trouble at Cairngorm. Their Chief Executive may have ignored my email Charlotte Wright 170825 and other such representations from the public, but their actions and failures are now being given far more extensive coverage in the traditional media. This is forcing them to respond and reveals that they are rather like a headless chicken.

Fergus Ewing, the Scottish Minister behind much of the disastrous management of Cairngorm, appears to have recognised the crisis and at the end of September convened a â??closedâ?• stakeholder meeting at Aviemore which HIE said was â??to maximise the benefits of snowsports on Cairngorm Mountain, a shared aim of everyone presentâ?•. While Mr Ewing claimed the meeting was with *â??HIE, Highland Council, snowsports community representatives and Natural Retreatsâ?•* the community representation had been fixed. There was no invitation to Save the Ciste or members of the Aviemore Business Association who have been behind the creation of the Cairngorm and Glenmore Trust which would like to takeover Cairngorm and have been advocating for snowsports there.

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Instead, the Cairngorm Mountain Trust, which sold Cairngorm Mountain Ltd to HIE back in 2008, was asked to represent the community. As an organisation its been fairly moribund since then but on 27th August 2017, according to information filed in companies house, two new Directors were appointed, Lesley McKenna (Manager Pipe and Park Team, British Ski and Board) and James Patrick Grant of Rothiemurchus (Financier). This has clearly been deliberately engineered â?? the Cairngorm Mountain Trust is a self-appointing group of people with no democratic links to the community â?? and explains how HIE and the Scottish Government were able to invite Lesley McKenna to the meeting. How Euan Baxter, who the Strathy said was present, got invited, I am not sure, but HIE has clearly included both in a desperate attempt to maintain some credibility with skiers.

HIEâ??s destruction of the ski infrastructure in Coire na Ciste

While Parkswatch has given some coverage to the Cairngorm â??Cleanupâ?• which has resulted in the removal of ski lifts from Coire na Ciste (see here), a lot of work has been going on behind the scenes by Save the Ciste activitists to reveal what has been going on. This has been given excellent coverage in a series of articles by Roger Cox in the Scotsman, a fantastic example of investigative journalism. The basis story is that HIE has spent Â£267,000 of public money on the chairlift demolition with no option appraisal, and without looking at the alternatives. This quote from the fifth article by Roger Cox is, I believe, essential reading for anyone who skis or who is concerned about HIEâ??s mismanagement of

Cairngorm:

â??Thanks to an FOI request by the Save the Ciste group, I have a copy of the report prepared by ADAC Structures, dated October 2016. It concerns the state of the concrete bases to which the chairlift towers were secured, not the towers themselves, and it notes that 20 per cent of the bases were in a stable condition, a further 16 per cent were buried, so could not be assessed, and the remaining 64 per cent were in need of repair or replacement. I ask if HIE got an estimate for the cost of replacing the damaged bases.

â??No,â?• says Bryers.

And did HIE get an estimate for the cost of repairing the lift towers?

â??No, we didnâ??t, no,â?• says Bryers.â?•

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Wright then brings up a piece of EU legislation called the Cableways Directive, which she says â??increased the standards requiredâ?• of chairlifts like the ones in the Ciste. Bryers says he thinks this directive made it â??impossible for [those chairlifts] ever to run again.â?• But, I suggest, as weâ??ve already established there were no attempts made to find out how much it would have cost to restore the bases and towers to working order, weâ??re really only guessing here â?? arenâ??t we? â??Yes,â?• says Bryers, â??to some degree weâ??re guessing, but some of the [staff at CairnGorm Mountain] are very experienced at dealing with these sorts of things so they have a good idea of what things are likely to cost and how practical they are.â?•

During my conversation with Adam Gough, it transpired that there is soon to be a review of uplift across the ski area. Given the safety concerns about the lift towers in the Ciste, I ask, would it not have been possible to simply un-bolt the towers and store them somewhere temporarily rather than chopping them down and scrapping them? That way, if it was found during the course of the review that there was a case for putting lifts back in the Ciste, it might have proved cheaper to renovate the bases that needed fixing and bolt the towers back on than to construct new lifts from scratch. Was that ever considered as an option? â??I can see why somebody might put that together as a realistic option,â?• says Wright, â??but I think our experience would say that it was absolutely unlikely that that would give us a safe, modern system.â?•

Shortly after my conversation with Wright and Bryers, I receive an email from Calum Macfarlane, media relations manager at HIE. â??On reflection,â?• he writes, â??I felt there was a lack of explanation on why HIE did not explore the cost of renovation/redevelopment/replacement of the chairlifts on Coire na Ciste. I asked my colleagues about this after the call and they explained that any redeveloped facility would have needed a commercial operator and there was no interest from the current or previous operator in restoring and running the facilities [in] Coire na Ciste.â?•

You can read the report on the state of the ski lift structures here and the full set of articles via the following links:

Introduction

The Community Bid

Natural Retreats view

Disputed account of what is going on

HIEâ??s defence (which includes the quote above)

Final words

The local community versus HIE

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Another piece of great coverage of Cairngorm was on BBC Radio Scotlandâ??s Out of Doors the last two Saturdays. If you have not listened to the interviews on I would recommend you do so while they are still on iplayer.

The first programme (see here 35 â?? 45mins into programme) features Mike Gale and Mike Dearman, two Directors of the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust (see here), about the community bid to take-over Cairngorm. I found both pretty impressive but you can judge for yourselves.

The second programme (see here) features two interviews with HIE staff as well as an interview with Ray Sefton about the closed funicular system.

The first part of programme (from 45 secs to 6 mins) was an interview with Sandra Holmes, Head of Community Assets at HIE whose job is to help community buyouts. She did not allow HIEâ??s ownership of Cairngorm get in the way with explaining how community asset transfers work and explained there are four requirements for this to happen, which are worth quoting:

- First is support from the local community
- Second is that the transfer can demonstrate community benefit and public interest
- Third is that the community has the capacity to manage the asset
- Fourth is that the community can raise the purchase trust.

Its worth turning these questions around. How much support does HIE have from the local community? With all the money at Cairngorm going to a company ultimately owned by a hedge fund manager, how much community benefit has Natural Retreats brought to Cairngorm and how is this

arrangement in the public interest? And as for capacity to manage Cairngorm, what do Charlotte Wright and Keith Bryerâ??s response to Roger Coxâ?? question say about HIEâ??s capacity to manage Cairngorm?

Later in the programme (from 22 mins 30 secs to 29 mins 30 secs) Susan Smith, Head of Business Development at HIE was interviewed. This was full of excuses such as *â??natural retreats quite rightly had to take timeâ?•* and Natural Retreats are only 3 years into a 25 year lease. This gave the impression that Natural Retreats are about to invest something in the mountain but despite references to a defined business plan and investment plan for the next three years, Susan Smith did not actually say whether any of the investment would come from Natural Retreats (we know HIE has committed Â£4m).

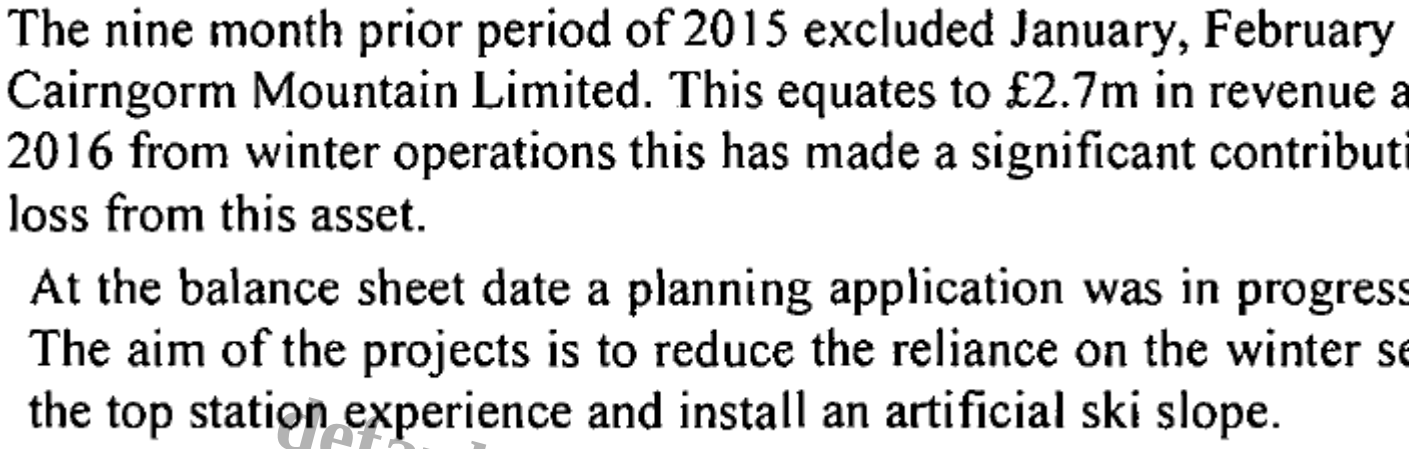
Information from the latest accounts of Cairngorm Mountainâ??s parent company Natural Assets Investment Ltd (which I will come back to in a future post) shows net liabilities have increased from Â£22,831,678 to Â£29,380, 827, yes, they were a further Â£6.5m in the red by the end of December 2016. As HIE has been waiting for Natural Retreats to invest, their parent company has been getting more and more into debt and only continues to operate because of assurances from its main shareholder and creditor, David Michael Gorton. Its hard to see Natural Retreats investing any money at Cairngorm anytime soon.

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The interview was full of further misleading responses:

- Talk about stewardship of the mountain and ensuring it is managed properly but no mention of: the work that took place last year at the Shieling outwith planning permission; HIEâ??s abandonment of previous standards for managing Cairngorm; or Natural Retreats failure to produce a comprehensive plan for Cairngorm as agreed in the Cairngorm and Glenmore Strategy.
- A repetition of the claim that the Ciste towers had to be demolished for Health and Safety reasons (disproved by Roger Cox above) when the Ciste building, which is far more dangerous, has still not to my knowledge been demolished. Moreover, there was no mention of the state of the concrete lift bases in Coire Cas (some of which are little better than those in Coire na Ciste)
- Reference to HIE agreeing Service Levels with Natural Retreats, as if everything is ok then, but no explanation of whether these have been met. Information on Natural Retreats performance need to be made public.
- Claims that HIE is committed to work in partnership when they wonâ??t even co-operate with the Cairngorms National Park Authority on the production of a plan and standards for Cairngorm (as the CNPA has requested). The history of HIEâ??s failure to engage with community, recreational or conservation interests is now a long one and their latest stance, which is that they will engage with skiers once the snow making trial planned for this winter is complete, says it all. They are only trialling the new snow making machines because of pressure from groups like Save the Ciste but wonâ??t even discuss how this might best be done.
- The claim that HIE is totally committed to winter sports. This is simply not true. HIEâ??s whole strategy since the funicular was constructed has been to try and increase summer use and it has

lamentably failed. It appointment of Natural Retreats, an operator which had no experience of snow sports, fitted with this strategy. What has become clear though is that the only time Cairngorm Mountain makes money is when there is lots of snow. There is clear evidence for this in a place you might not expect, the accounts of Natural Assets Investment Ltd (the company which owns Caingorm Mountain):


The nine month prior period of 2015 excluded January, February
Cairngorm Mountain Limited. This equates to £2.7m in revenue a
2016 from winter operations this has made a significant contributi
loss from this asset.

- At the balance sheet date a planning application was in progress
The aim of the projects is to reduce the reliance on the winter se
the top station experience and install an artificial ski slope.

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So, NAIL is acknowledging winter revenue is crucial and also that all the planned investment at Cairngorm is to reduce reliance on winter season revenues.

What the recent public interviews show is that HIE cannot be trusted to manage Cairngorm. The Community Asset transfer request needs to be evaluated against that record.

It would not be difficult to manage Cairngorm better than HIE but it looks like the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust is assembling a very strong team. The public can go and judge for themselves at an open day the Trust is holding on Cairngorm Hotel in Aviemore, on Tuesday 7th November between 2-8pm. *â??Everyone is invited to drop in and see the Trustâ??s outline plans for the future and to give us your ideas and feedbackâ?•.*

Category

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