

Grouse moor propaganda and the Cairngorms National Park

Description



Latest version of Welcome to the Moor sign, North Drumochter Estate. Among the organisations on the sign is the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)

Increasing numbers of a new version of the “Welcome to the moor” sign are now being erected across Scotland, particularly in the Cairngorms National Park, but so far have received, as far as I am aware, little critical comment.



Earlier version of sign, Dinnet Estate

When is a welcome not a welcome?

I have no problem with people being welcomed to moorland, in fact the more the better, but included in both versions of the Welcome to the Moor sign under the section on the Scottish Outdoor Access Code is a rather significant qualification *“It is recommended to keep to paths and tracks when possible”*. So, people are not really being welcomed to the moor, only to paths and tracks, a small percentage of total moorland.

Now I was involved in drawing up the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) and the only place it says that people should keep to paths and tracks is the section on privacy where it advises people to keep to a path or track – if there is one – when passing people’s houses. The whole point of the access legislation is it gives people a right to roam, whether on paths or off-paths. While no detailed guidance for grouse moor has been developed under the SOAC, detailed guidance was produced for

deer stalking – after endless discussion and debate between recreational organisations and landowners – and that is very clear:

“Any requests (to avoid certain areas) should relate to specific days and apply to the minimum necessary area – this is more likely to encourage a positive response than a longer-term and more general message”.



Extract from Stalking and Public Access:
Guidance for Land Managers

The furthest official guidance goes on deer stalking is to say that when stalking is actually taking place, *“you can help by using paths, following ridges and following the main watercourse if you have to go through a coire”* (see left). Contrast this with the Welcome to the Moor signs. They recommend people remain on paths and tracks at ALL times. The implication is that if you ignore the recommendation, you are being irresponsible. Even for people who are fully aware of their access rights, ignoring such signs creates a feeling of unease – will someone challenge you if you go off path?

There is no justification for the “recommendation” on the sign. Driven grouse moor shooting takes place on only a few days of the year and model signage has been produced to inform walkers that shooting, like deer stalking is in progress. The Welcome to the Moor sign makes no reference to the use of temporary signs to alert walkers when shooting is taking place because to do so would be to undermine the general message which is the public should stick to the path. The hypocrisy is these same estates are allowing vehicles, which do far more damage, to be driven willy nilly across grouse moors.

It is significant that these signs have not been endorsed by the National Access Forum and the latest version does not include the SOAC logo. So why is the Cairngorms National Park Authority, which is the statutory access authority and has a duty to protect access rights, lending its name to an initiative that is trying to undermine access rights?

The conservation benefits of grouse moors?

Its worse than that though. The first heading “Moorlands are full of wildlife” is for much of the Cairngorms National Park – and particularly where these signs are being erected – a lie. A few years ago I started wondering if I was missing something about grouse moor managers claiming moorland is good for wildlife – I would describe myself as a bad bird watcher – and deliberately went for a number of walks over moorland wildlife watching rather than walking up hills. Apart from red grouse and meadow pipit I have seen very little.

There is a reason for that and its got very little to do with my wildlife obervation skills. There is very little to see. In the September edition of Scottish Birds, the journal of the Scottish Ornithologists Club, there was an excellent article about the Lammermuirs which received national publicity ([see here](#)). Its not just about raptors, since the 1980s waders have declined as much as merlin, while grey partridge and short-eared owl had disappeared completely, the sound of the cuckoo was much rarer, while on the burns common sandpiper and dipper were hard to find. In addition, the authors found young ring ouzel appeared to have a fatal attraction to traps. I believe these findings are equally applicable to the Cairngorms.

As evidence for this (the exceptions prove the rule) you could do no better than read the Glen Tanar estate blog ([see here](#)) – and thanks to Raptor Persecution Scotland for the tip-off. The descriptions of stoat hunting hare are fantastic. What a brilliant estate! Unfortunately your chance of seeing stoats or raptors in much of the National Park is minimal.



Trap on north Drumochter estate

The reasons for this are twofold. The first is that any wildlife that is perceived as impacting on Red Grouse numbers is being systematically exterminated on most grouse moors in the National Park by a variety of means including trapping. That trapping is becoming a very political issue is seen by the claims last week ([see here](#)) by the Scottish Gamekeeper Association that visitors have been tampering with traps. The real question is not this – if its happening I can understand why people are angry enough to do so – but why our National Parks allow ANY trapping of wildlife? And if you think that is radical, its worth reading this comment from the Raptor Persecution Scotland blog (link above) that the UK is the ONLY country in the EU to still allow Fenn traps (the traps you find in the wire cages that are placed on logs across streams to catch stoat and weasel):



Fenn Trap Dinnet Estate

Lizzybusy

[October 27, 2017 at 10:14 pm](#)

Almost all shooting estates, and predominantly grouse shooting estates, use Fenn Traps. These diabolical traps should have been outlawed in the UK in July last year but the UK government was the only EU country to seek a derogation of implementing the ban for two years. These traps have been banned in the rest of the EU, Canada, the USA, and Russia and negotiations on the International TREATY have been taking place since the 1990s. The ban in the UK should have been enacted under the AIHTS (Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards) which outlaws traps which do not kill the 'target' animal within a certain time period (depending on the species) and by crushing the skull. Fenn Traps do not meet the criteria. In October 2015 Defra commissioned animal research into possibly two traps to determine whether these traps met the criteria. The research finished in February 2016 and the report of the results was given to the government just before the ban deadline. Defra claim

there are no traps which meet the criteria which have been drawn up before any new traps can be approved for use with stoats (the animals they are allegedly used to 'control' In the UK on grouse moors. I have been waiting and repeatedly waiting for a copy of the report since July 2016 which is supposed to be released 'soon' 'shortly'. In the meantime Defra have held Ministerial meetings about this international agreement with all the usual brigade (GWCT, BASC, NFU, NGA, MA, CA etc) but no animal welfare groups (or rather Defra identifies the establishment that carried out the lethal animal research as the animal welfare representative group!). All these groups and MPs with pecuniary interests in the shooting industry have held meetings with Defra and Ministers about the AIHTS for years. A key meeting with about 20 individuals and pro-shooting groups was held in January 2016 which was attended by Senior Defra officials. Following the meeting, Defra officials worked with some of the lobbyists to draw up an action plan for derogating the Agreement. Despite repeated FOI requests, Defra claims that no minutes of that meeting to discuss compliance or non compliance with an International Treaty were taken by Defra officials and none of them took notes! The GWCT have confirmed to me that their representative chaired the meeting and one of their group took the minutes of the meeting. They are refusing to release them to me and Defra claims not to have received copies of the minutes of this important legally crucial meeting so they cannot release them!

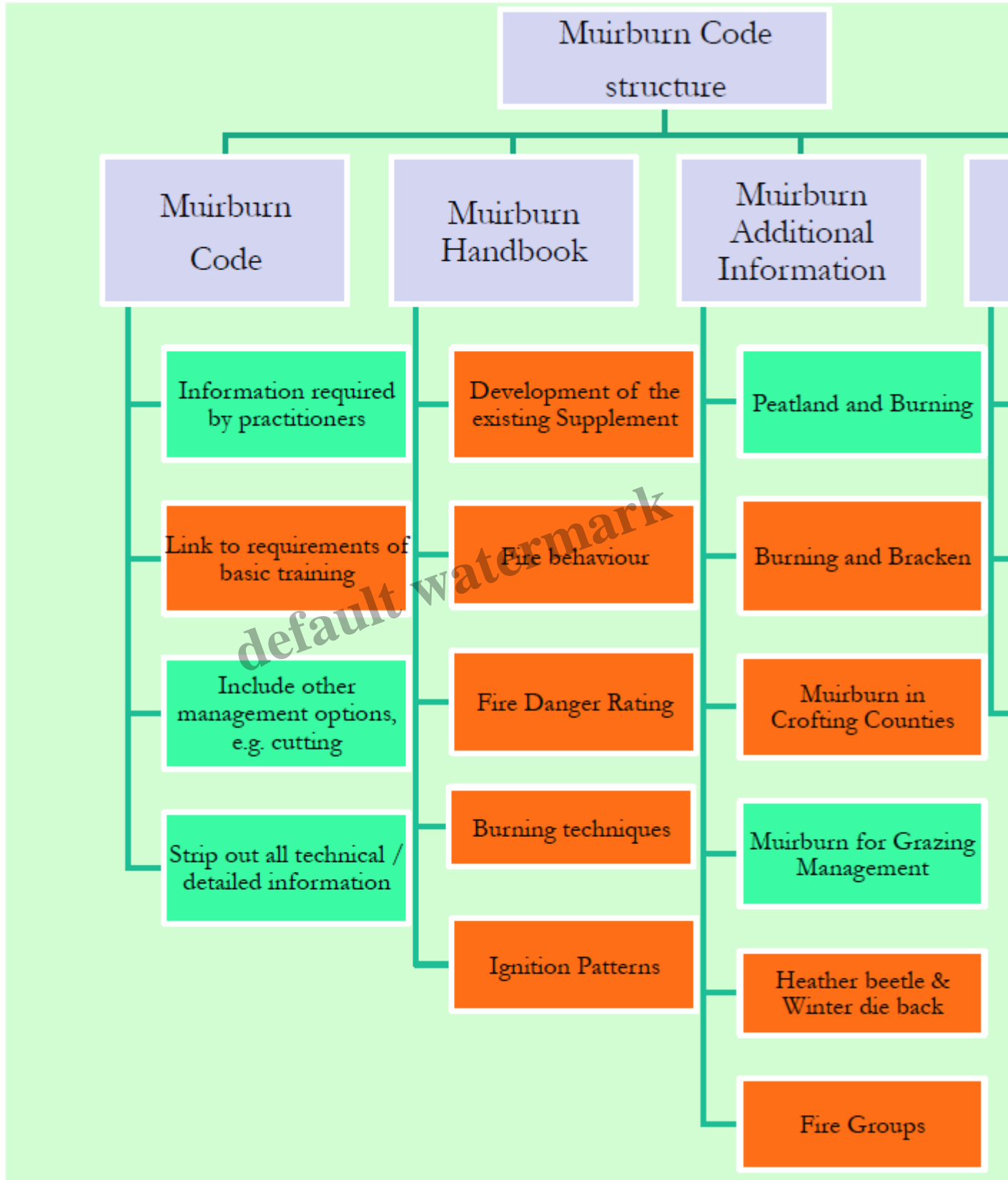
There is a link between the signs telling people to keep to the path and the persecution of wildlife in our National Parks. Most grouse moor managers just do not want the public to see what is going on. It won't be long until landed interests start calling for access bans from grouse moors to preserve the rural way of life. The best thing anyone who cares about wildlife in our National Parks can do therefore is to leave the path, record the wildlife you see (for example on birdtrack) and record traps and other signs of wildlife persecution.

The second reason why you won't see much wildlife in our National Parks is because of the way heather is promoted above all other plants, partly through moorland drainage but mainly through muirburn.



The destructive impact of muirburn, Glen Gairn

The only reason moorland is a rare habitat globally, as stated in the Welcome to the Moorland sign, is that no other country allows land to be managed in this way and yet we continue to do so, even in National Parks. On the one hand the Welcome to the Moor sign claims moorland is an important carbon store, in the next its describing muirburn which releases carbon. The sign claims muirburn is a carefully planned operation when in fact its highly disputed and contentious. The evidence for this can be seen in the new Muirburn Code which was issued in September:



The boxes in orange indicate the issues which have not yet been agreed – almost all are about how

In relation to the Cairngorms National Park, one might ask how the CNPA's endorsement of these

signs compatible with what is has said about moorland management during the development of the National Park Partnership Plan:

- *Controlled muirburn reduces the fuel load and can reduce the likelihood of spread of wildfires. Poorly managed muirburn can lead to destruction of rare habitats, carbon emissions, impact on water quality and creation of wildfires. A more selective approach would provide increased habitat biodiversity by leaving areas of scrub around the moorland edge, rather than managing simply in terms of either forest or moorland. (The Big 9 issues report).*
- *In some places however, the intensity of management measures to maintain or increase grouse populations is out of balance with delivering wider public interest priorities*
- *During the course of this Plan period we seek to establish, deliver and promote a shared understanding of what good moorland management looks like in the Cairngorms National Park. There is national guidance and current initiatives such as the revised muirburn code, and the Principles of Moorland Management. We will work with moorland managers and all relevant interests to agree what practical implementation of these means in a Cairngorms context and to deliver greater public benefits alongside other estate management objectives.*

There was nothing in the Partnership Plan to say heather moorland was a globally threatened habitat yet the CNPA has endorsed a sign which says just that. There is nothing in the signs which says the estates concerned have made any commitment to change the way they manage grouse moors so the implication is the CNPA is endorsing the way these estates are managed at present, which involves muirburn, bulldozing of tracks, persecution of wildlife.

What needs to happen?

The CNPA by endorsing these signs is in effect endorsing the intensive type of grouse moor management, which it says it wants to move away from, and undermining access rights. The CNPA keeps trying to say its caught between landowners and conservation and recreation interests and needs to take a middle way. However, when when push comes to shove it appears to end up supporting landowner interests rather than the rights of the public.

What is should do is tell the sponsors of this sign, Scottish Land and Estates, the Scottish Countryside Alliance Education Trust and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust that it will no longer support these signs and that the message about access needs to be changed to make it clear that people are welcome all over grouse moors. If necessary, it could work with recreation interests and the National Access Forum to apply existing guidance under the SOAC to grouse moors so grouse moor managers are absolutely clear about what is acceptable.

Meantime I think the only signs the CNPA should be associated with are on estates like Glen Tanar which do respect the vast majority of wildlife and try to manage the land in the way the CNPA set out in their Partnership Plan.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. access rights
2. CNPA
3. landed estates
4. wildlife persecution

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