

Natural Retreats incompetence at Cairngorm and in Yorkshire

Description



People queuing at Cairngorm Mountain on Thursday

While over the last couple of years I have frequently raised concerns about the management of the natural environment at Cairngorm, the absence of any proper plan for the area and the proposals for yet more inappropriate developments and the financial position and practices of Natural Retreats, parkswatch has so far not commented on their day to day management of the area. On Thursday it

was dire and there were many adverse comments on social media:



The shambles at equipment hire 5th April was just part of the problem. The Day Lodge poma did not run all day and the ridge poma only started at 1pm despite plenty of snow – apparently because there was no-one to staff it. At 12.45 there were just two ticket offices staffed and the queues stretched down the stairs. And what happened on Thursday was just the latest in a long saga of incidents this year. While the other Scottish ski areas have been prospering with all the snow, Cairngorm has been

floundering.

The difficulties in keeping the ski road open, which illustrates the folly in Highlands and Islands Enterprise removing infrastructure from the far more sheltered Coire na Ciste, have not helped but the real problem is how the UKGreat Travel Company, the new name for Natural Retreats, is managing the ski area on behalf of the owners (who appear to be Natural Assets Investment Ltd). The huge increase in administration costs report in annual accounts since Natural Retreats took over seems to have been matched by a decline in service standards at Cairngorm which, I suspect, are linked to changes (for the worse) in staff pay and conditions and leadership.

If I am right about this – and I think HIE should come clean about what changes there have been to staff pay and conditions since Natural Retreats took over – the incentive for people to work at Cairngorm would reduce and that would explain the serious failures in service on Thursday. While CML apologised for these on Facebook claiming they were due to “staffing issues” if this was due to staff having the flu why not just say so? The explanation is not good enough and HIE need to investigate, tell the public what has been going wrong and put in a plan to remedy this otherwise skiers will continue to abandon Cairngorm in droves.

Back in September, on 29th to be precise, HIE met with Cabinet Secretary Fergus Ewing to discuss concerns about Cairngorm. No minute was taken of the meeting – a common failure now for meetings involving Ministers – but I obtained this through my Freedom of Information request:

1. Introduction

‘The purpose of this Briefing is to update the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy & Connectivity on the matters relating to Cairngorm Mountain Ltd (CML / NR) in preparation for the meetings, first with the Cairngorm Mountain Trust (CMT)& HIE on 22/9/2017 and then with the other stakeholders (CML/NR; THC) plus the CMT and HIE, on 29/9/2017’...(Briefing for Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy & Connectivity, 29th September 2017).

‘HIE awaits agenda items from CMT and Highland Council. We would offer the following agenda items :

How we can improve the winter season for all concerned

- ***What we can all do to improve communications***
- ***How can we promote the awareness of the local business community re sustainability of CML***
- ***How can we facilitate a re-engagement of the Scottish skiing community***
- ***Consider a wider forum of stakeholders (e.g. ABA, CNPA, SNH etc.)’....***(Briefing for Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy & Connectivity, 29th September 2017).

So what has happened since then? That is not public but whatever was discussed and agreed was not sufficient to prevent the shambles on Thursday or the best winter for many years being wasted.

And down in Yorkshire

Meantime, another shambles involving Natural Retreats, was – further to my post last week ([see here](#)) – given excellent coverage by the Yorkshire Post on Friday:

Cries of ‘disgrace’ as North Yorkshire holiday park gets permission for extension despite pollution fears



It is feared contaminants from the Natural Retreats' scheme may have led to pollution in the River Swale. Picture: Jonathan Gawthorpe
Credit Yorkshire Post

[\(see here for whole article – you need to subscribe\)](#)

While planning permission was granted to Natural Retreats to construct new holiday chalets, these were far fewer than had been applied for 18 months previously and the Richmond Council included a condition that BEFORE any work could commence there had to be a full investigation and clean up of the pollution on the site. Here is what the YP had to say about how this pollution had been managed:

The meeting heard a report by consultants Amec Foster Wheeler, which was published in June 2016, but not posted on the council's website until December 2017, revealed highly elevated concentrations of lead and concentrations of copper, nickel and zinc had been found on the former Army rifle range and council landfill site. The report states "there are potential unacceptable outstanding risks to human health should the remediation and mitigation measures recommended to the council in 2003 not have been implemented". The meeting, which saw councillor Jimmy Wilson-Petch apologise for proposing

the application be granted ahead of a debate, was told livestock had died as a result of council planners' failure to enforce its planning conditions. She said: "Council officers, being aware of such vital evidence, should have reassured the public that mitigation measures would be implemented immediately and made sure they were." Neighbours John and Nora Yates told the meeting: "It can be assumed that all owners, visitors on this site, plus the owners and visitors to surrounding land, are at risk from exposure to these contaminants." Gordon Love, of Richmondshire Landscape Trust, added: "We have been advised than any or all of these contaminants may have spread onto our land and to the River Swale." He said while the council had pledged to impose planning conditions on the latest application that the contamination issues needed to be cleared up before the new lodges were built, "given the history of this matter we have no confidence that such conditions would be enforced"

If HIE and Fergus Ewing don't find that a shocking indictment of Natural Retreats.....

Category

- 1. Cairngorms

Tags

- 1. CNPA
- 2. HIE
- 3. natural retreats
- 4. planning
- 5. Tourism

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