

The collapse of downhill skiing at Cairngorm and the economy in the National Park

Description



The West Wall poma base, in urgent need of repair, with electricity sub-station and collapsed snow fence behind on 26th May 2018

After the record temperatures in the Highlands it may seem strange to write about what's happening to downhill skiing at Cairngorm and the impact on the local economy but its all related to the current planning applications at Cairngorm. The first, the application to install a dry ski slope above the Coire Cas carpark ([see here](#)) and the second, the long awaited planning application ([see here](#)) for the Ptarmigan which was called in by the Cairngorms National Park Authority on 14th May (and which I will

consider in detail in a later post).

Officially everything is fine and dandy at Cairngorm after the last ski season:



Article from Strathy 10th May

Having been instrumental first in securing a snow making machine and second in HIE's purchase of road clearing equipment, Fergus Ewing probably had no choice but to claim the ski season at Cairngorm had been a success. On the ground, the lack of staff and queues ([see here](#)) told a different story.

To understand what is really going on you need to consider the downhill ski statistics for the last 15 years:

CairnGorm			Glenshee		
	Numbers	% market		Numbers	% market
2003/4	58,500	35.57%		27,471	16.70%
2004/5	55,586	37.77%		36,000	24.46%
2005/6	55,000	35.53%		42,460	27.43%
2006/7	38,553	48.77%		8,521	10.78%
2007/8	62,000	37.55%		39,007	23.63%
2008/9	65,000	40.66%		43,000	26.89%
2009/10	145,000	38.72%		116,614	31.13%
2010/11	121,000	41.80%		95,571	33.00%
2011/12	66,463	50.48%		33,947	25.78%
2012/13	113,000	38.83%		92,899	31.92%

2013/14	77,430	32.92%	84,397	35.88%
2014/15	76,588	33.21%	58,407	25.60%
2015/16	67,000	32.29%	59,126	28.49%
2016/17	21,267	39.63%	12,111	22.57%
2017/18	59,003	23.62%	76,367	30.57%
	1,081,390		825,898	

Cairngorm used to be the largest and most important centre for downhill skiing in Scotland and over the last fifteen years has still counted more ski days than anywhere else. This year, however, it recorded its smallest market share ever and was overtaken by Glen Shee for the second time in five years, something that had never happened until 2013/4. Meantime, Glen Coe, recorded its BEST season ever.

While 59,003 skiers may have been a significant increase from last year, that was exceptionally poor for snow. In historical terms, Cairngorm has not attracted fewer skiers since 2006/07 and the figure is way below the number of skiers who visited in the past with all the consequences that has for the economy on Speyside. So what is going on?

Highland and Island's Enterprise and Natural Retreats' explanation for this drop in ski numbers has been to blame the wind and the snow. Snow did block the ski road on occasions but this does not explain why in the past, when there was far more snow than now, Cairngorm used to be kept open. Indeed it was partly because Cairngorm received large amounts of snow that it did better than anywhere else in the past.

What the statistics show is that since HIE decided to outsource Cairngorm – in 2013/14 – the numbers of skiers and market share at Cairngorm has dropped significantly. The exception, in 2016/17 when Cairngorm's market share approached historical levels, is explained by the altitude of the runs in the Ptarmigan bowl which give Cairngorm a relative advantage in very poor snow years.

A much convincing explanation lies in how Cairngorm is being managed by HIE:

- The outsourcing of ski operations to Natural Retreats, a company that has no expertise in managing ski resorts or land in sensitive protected areas, has not been a success and customer service has generally been poor. As a result, skiers have voted with their feet.
- A historical lack of investment in downhill ski infrastructure has resulted in many of the lifts which used to exist at Cairngorm falling into disuse and the consequence is that the other ski centres in Scotland offer a better range of skiing when they have snow.
- Investment has been in the wrong things, starting with the funicular – which was not good for skiers – and more recently the Shielling Rope tow which is in the wrong place (it had little use this year).

Investment in infrastructure at Cairngorm

My thanks to George Paton who obtained the figures below on investment at Cairngorm through an FOI request to HIE and shared them with Parkswatch

**Cairngorm additions by
year**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Additions</u>
	£
2008	-
	£
2009	-
	£
2010	-
	£
2011	-
	£
2012	34,455.13
	£
2013	1,742.74
	£
2014	-
	£
2015	577,332.19
	£
2016	744,584.33
	£
2017	128,194.49
	£
2018	221,813.35
	£
Total	1,708,122.23

HIE needs to explain why it will only apparently invest to help private interests.

The figures show that there was almost NO investment by HIE in the assets it – and the public – own at Cairngorm until Natural Retreats were awarded the contract to run the place in 2014. Since Cairngorm had been outsourced to private interests, the levels of public money invested have soared and there is far more promised with £1.5m committed to the Coire Cas dry ski slope and £2.5m to the Ptarmigan redevelopment. In whose interest is this?

A high proportion of the money HIE has spent so far in the four years since Natural Retreats took over is ostensibly related to skiing. However much of this has been driven by HIE's contractual obligations to Natural Retreats to maintain the ski infrastructure in a fit state and by Health and Safety requirements: hence the emergency repairs to the Cas Gantry and various electrical works. Apart from the Shielling rope tow, HIE has been removing old ski infrastructure rather than replacing it.

While HIE has now commissioned a review of ski infrastructure at Cairngorm ([see here](#)), it had

previously agreed to finance two new developments at Cairngorm, without any masterplan and without any reference to what further investment might be needed at Cairngorm to maintain what remains of the delapidated skiing infrastructure. The need for more investment in ski infrastructure was only too obvious at the West Wall poma uplift in Coire na Ciste on Saturday (see top photo too). While a new electrical motor has been installed, as part of electrical renewal works, the gantry is in a terrible state of disrepair:



The health and safety risks are obvious and how the West Wall Poma was allowed to operate last winter I am not clear. One wonders if Natural Retreats ever submitted health and safety reports on this to HIE?



Even if they didn't, HIE directly managed the removal of the ski infrastructure in Coire na Ciste and, had they supervised this, the dangerous state of the gantry would have been obvious. The organisation that accepted with question that the old lift towers in Coire na Ciste needed removal because of the poor state of the concrete plinths was blind apparently to the state of the West Wall poma.



West Wall poma – while Natural Retreats have replaced some of the snow fencing, for which they are responsible, they have a long way to go.

Its not difficult to predict what is going to happen. Either HIE will be forced to fork out public money on emergency repairs or the West Wall poma will go the way of the other three lifts in Coire na Ciste and end up being removed.

The economic case for the dry ski slope

In a rational world all new developments at Cairngorm would be halted until there is a proper master plan – promised but never delivered – which sets out plans for the existing infrastructure and protection of the natural environment as well as potential new developments. From a financial perspective it is hard to understand why HIE is proposing to lend “Natural Retreats” £1.5m to build a dry ski slope when

it has NO plan to invest in existing ski infrastructure and no idea, apparently, what it will cost to bring this up to a safe and acceptable state.

Since I last posted on the dry ski slope at Coire Cas, Natural Retreats has been busy encouraging people to write in support of the proposal and, by the end of April, 32 supporters outnumbered 21 objectors. Most letters of support are based on a belief that a dry ski slope will bring economic benefit and extend the ski season. The evidence shows that both of these beliefs, which also appear shared by HIE, are wrong. First consider the business case quoted in the application supporting statement:

- *Having prepared a sensitised business model to support the commercial rationale for an artificial slope, the operation proved viable operating just 960 hours per annum, at less than 30% of total user capacity.*
- *At maturity, this equates to a combination of approximately 7,000 beginners and intermediate skiers and snowboarders taking lessons using the artificial slope.*

7,000 lessons, even if charged as much as a full day ski pass, will do hardly anything to compensate for the drop in ski numbers shown in the statistics quoted above and will have little impact on the economy of Speyside. Indeed, since most of the users of the dry ski slope are predicted in summer, they would almost certainly come from existing summer visitors and therefore not add anything to the local economy. HIE would be much better investing in proper new ski lifts to attract people in winter.

Second, the evidence from elsewhere is that people are not attracted to artificial ski slopes in summer to learn to ski. The Lecht used to have an artificial slope but that has now gone while that in Glen Coe is used for people wanting to maintain skills – and highly motivated – rather than beginners. There is also anecdotal evidence that artificial ski slopes in North American ski resorts have closed: having commissioned a North American firm of consultants to report on ski infrastructure at Cairngorm, there is no excuse for HIE not being informed about what the evidence from North America shows about the likely success of this proposal. To proceed with the planning application until they have this evidence and have made it public is reckless.

Its clear that in responding to the challenges of warmer winters, ski resorts across the world have had to diversify but its into activities that depend on the natural environment – like mountain biking – not into the type of proposals HIE is punting at Cairngorm.



The beach at Loch Morlich

On a sunny day, like last weekend, its pretty obvious most people will vote to enjoy the outdoors – for free! – rather than to take the funicular to be confined to the Ptarmigan restaurant or take lessons on a ski carpet above a carpark.

£1.5m artificial slope 'wrong' for Cairngorm

By Gavin Musgrove
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A SNOWSPORTS campaign group has claimed that plans for a £1.5 million artificial ski slope at Cairngorm Mountain are "the wrong slope in the wrong place for the wrong reasons".

Save the Ciste believes the proposed addition of what they have identified as a Snowflex slope at the site above Coire Cas car park will have major operational problems in the coldest weather.

They also claim there is a better alternative for just half of the price for the slope which is planned near to the Day Lodge Poma.

Alan Bratley, of Save the Ciste said: "We question why the applicant maintains a veil of secrecy over the type of slope that they propose to build when the evidence points to it being a Snowflex slope.

"We've concerns about the usability of a slope that requires a water based misting system on a slope that will be located approximately 2300ft above sea level.

"There will unquestionably be periods of time when the slope will not be capable of use because the temperatures will be below freezing point and the misting system will not be capable of being switched on.



WELCOME TO THE SLOPE: Campaigners say the same type of slope in use at Keswick (pictured) would be an eyesore at Coire Cas.

"We question why the operator is intent on building such a slope at a cost of around £1.5 million - a figure provided by the architect at the open day held in the Cairngorm Hotel.

"We contacted Neveplast, a market leading artificial slope manufacturer, who told us they have never been contacted by the applicant but that they'd be pleased to provide a quotation which would be in the region of £750,000 for a similar sized slope.

"A Neveplast slope doesn't require a misting system and would be capable of use more frequently than a Snowflex slope; it would cost much less to construct and would also require less maintenance as no pipework is involved."

Fellow STC member Alan

Mackay said: "The applicant has previously been advised by Cairngorms National Park planning team that neither a green or white coloured slope would be appropriate.

"In addition, the CNPA in their landscape specialist advice submission to planning stated 'the colour green is not appropriate to this landscape'. Their submission also contains pictures of a Snowflex Slope at Keswick in the Lake District."

"These pictures show what the slope will look like over time and they are not pretty pictures. Snowflex is only manufactured in white or green whereas Neveplast can be manufactured in any colour.

"It's our view that the evidence points to the fact that the applicant is proposing to



ALAN BRATLEY: Save the Ciste.

build the wrong slope for several reasons: high price, usability, ongoing maintenance costs for a misting system and colour."

The applicant has forecast that the slope will be used by up to 210 customers each day during the summer season and by 13,000 users per year.

But Mr Mackay said: "The empirical evidence from other Scottish ski areas would suggest that such a forecast is wildly optimistic. Glenshee and Lecht have both removed artificial slopes because there was no demand for them. Glencoe, had they been asked, would have been able to tell the applicant there is no demand for ski lessons on their artificial slope during the summer

when it is used for tubing."

Mr Bratley said the season-proofing the business was essential but continued: "Committing around £1.5 million to this project will not help the business to achieve that aim. The evidence suggests that an artificial slope will not make a return on the investment. We have long been advocates of capital expenditure on infrastructure developments on Cairngorm Mountain. The proposal to construct an artificial ski slope, now before the CNPA planning committee, is the wrong slope in the wrong location for the wrong reasons."

The campaign group also points out the proposed site is known as the 'Windy Ridge' because of the prevailing winds and the area is in full view of everyone who visits Coire Cas, as well as from further away.

A Cairngorm Mountain spokesperson said: "The research into the slope surface is still ongoing. We will, of course, be thorough and seek the advice of snowsport instructors to identify the best and safest surface for the slope which will be primarily aimed at beginners and families."

A Cairngorms National Park Authority spokesperson said the application was provisionally due to be considered at their meeting in August.

The excellent article in the Strathy earlier this month illustrates how this disaster has been allowed to develop. As long as HIE is funding everything, there is no risk to Natural Retreats coming up with any old proposal, and they appear to have been given a free hand to spend what they want: how else do you explain HIE's commitment of £1.5m to an artificial ski slope based on a quote from snowflex when an alternative manufacturer could apparently do it for half the price and a better specification?

This adds to the argument that there would be far less risk and far greater potential benefit to the Speyside economy if the HIE were to invest its £1.5m in downhill ski infrastructure rather than an artificial ski slope.

The planning application for the dry ski slope

The Cairngorms National Park Authority, while it needs to determine the application for the dry ski slope on planning grounds, will also take the alleged economic impact into account. I hope this post has demonstrated that there is at present NO good economic evidence to justify this proposal going

ahead and that the CNPA should be free to determine the development on its landscape impact.

The CNPA landscape adviser submitted an excellent report ([see here](#)) on the landscape impact of the proposed development which concludes:

“It is clear that the proposed development would create a new feature that strongly contrasts with the current landscape features of the site. The development will have significant adverse landscape and visual effects and will not compliment or enhance the landscape character or special landscape qualities of the site and its surroundings.”

That should be sufficient for the CNPA Planning Committee , which has a duty to protect the landscape of the National Park and Cairngorms National Scenic Area, to reject this proposal. It would help, however, if more organisations and individuals objected ([you can do so here](#)) on grounds of the landscape impact while noting the development is unlikely to bring any of the claimed economic benefits.

Category

1. Cairngorms

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1. CNPA
2. HIE
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