

Skiers will be 'driven away by car park fees'

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CHARGING snowsports visitors to Cairngorm Mountain could increase the "exodus" of skiers and snowboarders at the resort, it is being claimed.

The attraction is introducing charges from tomorrow on a trial basis at its three car parks – the upper and lower Coire Cas and the Coire na Ciste facilities.

Resort bosses have said that the current voluntary arrangement is not generating anywhere near enough income to cover the maintenance costs.

They have said the money generated will be used to improve the parking areas and wider facilities.

A Cairngorm Mountain spokesperson said: "The funding from car parking charges will be reinvested in a number of initiatives over the next few years including the installation of interpretative material and improved signage."

"In the long term it is hoped that a 24-hour toilet facility could be introduced, as well as improved camper van facilities and electric hook-ups and additional ski racks installed around the Day Lodge buildings."

"Initially, however, the priority will be to resurface the car parks and improve parking bay markers and drainage."



CHARGING DRIVE: Coire Cas car park towards the end of last winter with the Base Station and the Day Lodge in the background.

"Feedback from visitors as well as season pass holders has consistently highlighted growing concerns about potholes and other maintenance issues in the car parks."

Cairngorm Mountain said it will review the trial in the autumn.

Resort general manager Janette Jansson said: "The maintenance of our car parks is becoming a bigger challenge every year."

"The introduction of the parking charge will certainly help towards the ongoing maintenance of the car parks, as well as improving the other services and activities we provide here at Cairngorm Mountain, ensuring the best possible visitor experience for our customers."

Cairngorm Mountain pointed out it is the last large car-parking facility in the area to introduce parking charges and the proposed tariff has been determined in line with the existing local provision.

Before introducing the trial, resort bosses said they had consulted with all the relevant statutory bodies.

Those buying ski day tickets will be charged £2 per vehicle per day. Exemptions from charges will be staff, season pass holders, furlough pass holders, coaches and the disabled.

Aviemore Business Association (ABA) believes charging skiers will add to the "exodus" of snowsports enthusiasts.

This past season was the first time that Cairngorm has fallen below the 30 per cent share of the Scottish ski market.

There were 59,003 skier days – 23.62 per cent of the market.

The resort had a high of 50.48 per cent in 2011/12 with 66,463 skier days and the previous lowest was 32.29 per cent (67,000) in 2015/16.

ABA secretary Alan Bratley said: "We have concerns about car parking charges if these have to be paid by those who are skiing at Cairngorm but are not season ticket holders."

"With the day ticket price already being the most expensive in Scotland then an additional £2 charge will only serve to chase away more customers. It has to be borne in mind that last season saw the lowest ever recorded market share at Cairngorm and asking customers to pay more when there have been no improvements to the

snowsports infrastructure will be counterproductive.

"It's to be hoped that snowsports customers will not be required to pay an additional cost."

The Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust is in the process of trying to take community control of the resort.

Mike Dearman, Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust, spokesman said: "The trust thinks there is a valid debate to be had about car-parking charges across the Glenmore area where the money is clearly ring-fenced for maintenance."

"However, we know this is a contentious issue and are concerned that this is being brought in by Cairngorm Mountain without consultation with the public."

"After a winter which saw a dramatic drop in the number of snowsports visitors compared to the rest of the centres, we believe community engagement is more important than ever to win customers back along with a clear and positive vision for the future."

Cairngorm Mountain has two car parks close to the ski centre (Upper and Lower Coire Cas) and one further down the road which acts as a winter overspill car park and a summer access point for walkers heading into the Ciste.

Skiers won't be

the only people amazed at Natural Retreats' announcement that they were – after consultation with public agencies but NOT the public – going to introduce car parking charges at Cairngorm last week. While the basic £2 charge adds insult to the injury done to skiers at Cairngorm by Natural Retreats' last winter – the queues, the blocked ski road etc resulted in Cairngorm's smallest ever share of the ski



Pay & Display tariffs	
All vehicles (Up to 1hr)	£1.00
Car (Up to 3hrs)	£1.50
Car (Day ticket)	£2.00
Minibus & Coach (Day ticket)	£8.00

the £8 charge they face.

The explanation for this £8 charge can probably be found lower down in Glenmore where the Forestry Commission has an £8 charge for minibuses at its car parks. Natural Retreats seems to have used the FCS as a benchmark for charging but, instead of treating campervans as cars, decided to charge them the same as minibuses! An attempt to fleece one of the more affluent segments of the tourism market.

This post takes a look at what's driving the charges and where the money raised is likely to end up.

The alleged justification for the car parking charges



Up until now there have been a number of signs around the Coire Cas carpark asking for voluntary contributions.

According to Natural Retreats' [News Release](#) the justification for compulsory car parking charges is that there is a large deficit in the costs of maintaining the car parks at present, the voluntary donations scheme has not worked and the money will be re-invested in improving the car parks and associated facilities at some point in the future. All these claims are highly questionable.

First, it's not clear that Natural Retreats has invested anything in the car parks to date, apart from emergency repairs, and the consequence of this lack of investment is of course that they are in a poor state – which may help explain why only 1 in 20 pay the voluntary charge. Why pay to park on pot holes and on what are terrible eyesores? However, rather than bringing the car parks – and it appears both the Coire Cas and Coire na Ciste car parks are included in these charges – up to a decent standard first, Natural Retreats is going to charge drivers and then, perhaps, do something to improve the area. It's important to recall that when HIE announced the appointment of Natural Retreats to Cairngorm they were to bring what was alleged to be much needed private sector investment. This is

another example of Natural Retreats taking the money first – whether they will actually then invest anything remains to be seen.

HIE's lease with Cairngorm Mountain Ltd, the company they sold to the Natural Retreats group of companies, requires Cairngorm Mountain to keep all the "Premises" in a "good and substantial condition" and "premises" is defined to include both car parks:

- 1.13.1 maintain and keep the Excluded Chairlifts in s
safeguard the public and the Tenant's staff at
regular condition checks by a qualified pers
maintenance (such reports to be made available**
- 1.13.2 save as aforementioned in Clause 1.13.1 of thi
substantially repair, maintain, renew, rebuild a
respects put and keep the Premises (includin
Uplift Infrastructure (including the Exception
and Fittings) in good and substantial condition
watertight condition, with all maintenanc
reinstatement works whatsoever regardless of t
the whole or part of the Premises and irrespec
damage necessitating such repair, maintenanc
reinstatement and including any which may
latent or inherent defects in the whole or part o**

Extract fom HIE'e lease with Cairngorm Mountain

“Premises” means the visitor attraction at Cairngorm blue on the Plan TOGETHER WITH all additions, alterations may be carried out during the Lease Period and each without limitation (i) all apparatus, plant and machinery fittings from time to time in and about the same, including (ii) all service and conducting media (including any Service over the same and (iii) the Uplift Infrastructure therein and all roads, paths and tracks therein and thereon and therein and thereon, which premises form part and portion

Under sub-section (iv) the car parks are clearly defined as part of the premises

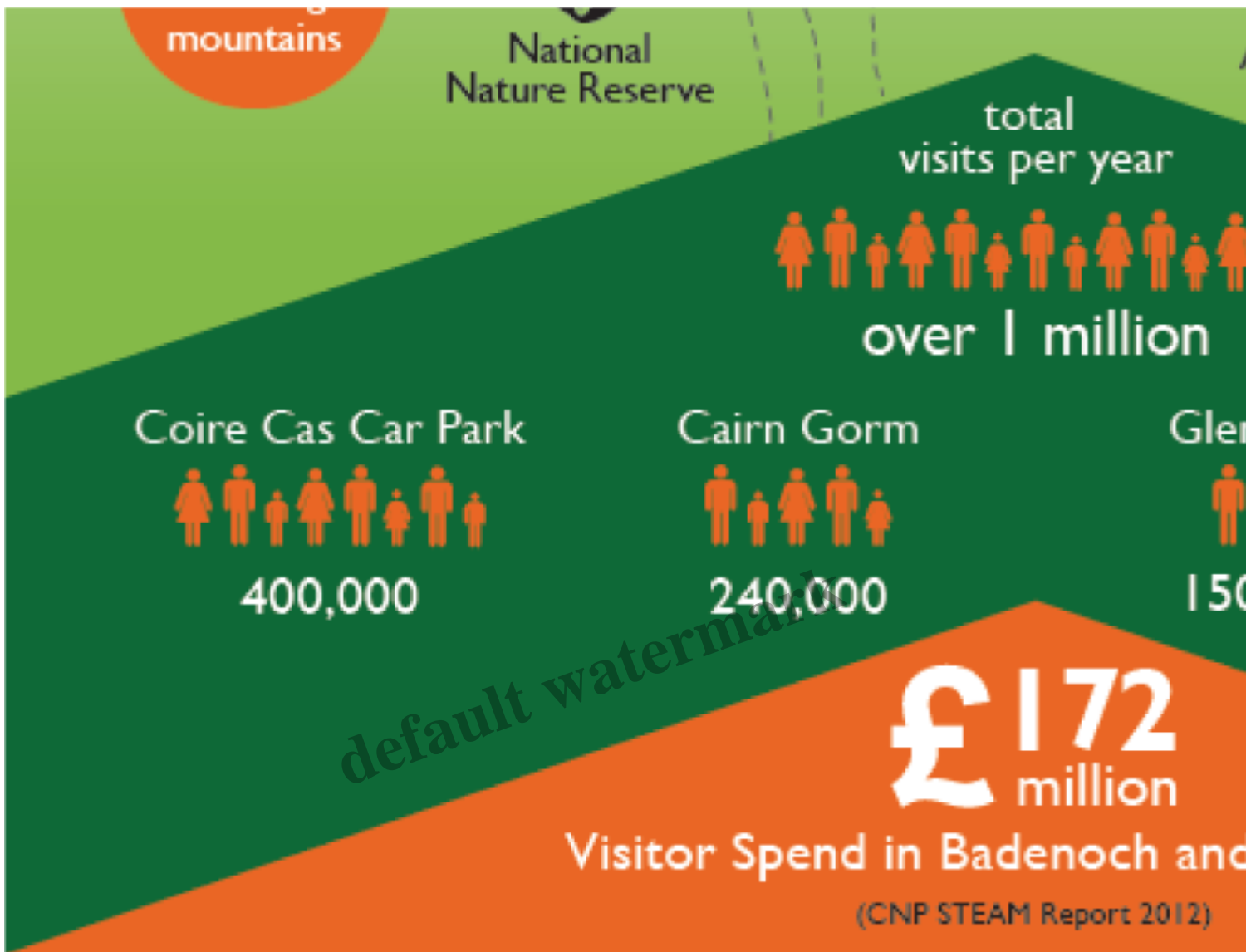
So, why has HIE not enforced the terms of its lease and forced Natural Retreats to keep the car parks in a fit and proper state in the four years that they have had the contract to run Cairngorm?

Second, the lease includes what is known as “Service Levels”, and this has a section on car parking which includes HIE’s expectations in terms of revenue to be raised through car parking charges – £15,000 a year:

7a	Car Parking	Provision and maintenance of car parking facilities and related services which are aligned with other skier and non-skier customer services and designed to maximise their commercial potential	(i) The Supplier must parking capacity (in minimum level of for an open access basis. (iii) Vehicle and car managed at all time restrictions
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7b		Encourage greater use of a voluntary, nominal fee for car park usage.	£15,000 parking
7c		Provision of a free-to-customers shuttle service between the Day Lodge and the Coire na Ciste overflow car park	Shuttle anticipated full with minutes
8a	Public Toilets	Provision and maintenance of public toilet facilities which are aligned with other skier and non-skier customer services	(i) The toilet facility is operational future (ii) Day 8am and during

Now, according to Natural Retreats' News Release there are 220,000 visitors to the Cairngorm car park each year. If this is right, visitor numbers appear to have halved in the two years since the Cairngorms National Park Authority produced its Glenmore and Cairngorm Strategy – cause in itself for HIE to terminate their lease with Natural Retreats:



Assuming Natural Retreats' figures are right and there are now only 200,000 visitors to the car park and assuming on average there are three to a vehicle that would make c.65,000 vehicles. If 1 in 20 pay the voluntary charge that makes 3250 a year pay the £2 charge bringing in £6,500 in income. If however the CNPA figures are correct it would be double that and Natural Retreats would have been receiving £13,000 a year or almost the £15,000 that HIE set them to collect. The first question HIE need to answer is how much of that money has been spent on the car parks since Natural Retreats took over? The second is how Natural Retreats is going to spend the money it will collect from these new charges? By my reckoning that should be at least £150k in extra income in return for vague promises of future investment.

The problem here is twofold. First is that HIE is refusing to divulge where all the money at Cairngorm is going – their Chief Executive has told me the relationship between Cairngorm Mountain and Natural Retreats is commercially confidential and confirmed that they have never looked at what Natural Retreats (now in the form of the UK Great Travel Company) is charging for its services at Cairngorm.

The suspicion therefore is that this is yet more money that will be sucked out of Cairngorm and the local economy. The second is that there is still NO masterplan at Cairngorm, as promised by HIE and Natural Retreats to the CNPA as part of the Glenmore and Cairngorm Strategy. Until there is complete transparency on what is happening at Cairngorm and a plan for the whole mountain which has been properly consulted on these charges should be opposed.

What needs to happen

The car parks at Cairngorm have not been fit for purpose for years. They are far too large, the landscaping is non-existing – there are opportunities to plant native trees to reduce the landscape impact – and the associated facilities poor. HIE and Natural Retreats should have been addressing issues like this before chucking £1.5m at their ill considered dry ski slope but neither has done so which is why I believe both ownership and management of Cairngorm needs to be transferred to the local community.

There is a place for car parking charges but facilities need to come first. £8 might be fine for a campervan staying overnight if there were electric hook ups, 24 hour toilets and a chemical disposal point. In green terms, car parking charges could be also used to help get better public transport locally avoiding the need for cars. There is no firm commitment or plans however to make things happen. Investment should precede charges.

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3. secrecy
4. Tourism

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