

Cairngorm Mountain: the Compulsory Parking Charges

Description

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Natural Retreats, the operator of the CairnGorm Mountain business, introduced compulsory parking charges at the end of June 2018.

These parking charges replaced a voluntary scheme, that had been in operation since 2012, because insufficient funds were being donated, according to Natural Retreats. The amounts donated during each year since 2013 were: £10,426, £11,174, £11,427, £8,644 and £5234 being £46,905 in total.

At the outset of the Voluntary Scheme in 2012 the Mountaineering Council for Scotland (now Mountaineering Scotland) had this to say:

"We have no objection to the voluntary scheme if it is to go towards path and environmental management"

"The CairnGorm Mountain statement says takings will be used for 'reinvestment in footpaths, environmental projects, car parks and facilities' We have concerns that 'facilities' is a catch all and this would have to be broken down for transparency.....with a full audit. This is essential if the trial is to be the basis of decisions about compulsory charging"

"Currently our agreed Position Statement, consulted on with membership 2 years ago, is that an introduction of compulsory charges for nothing new is not something we would likely find acceptable. At the end of the trial period we would look very closely at the audit of where the money was spent and listen to the views of mountaineers"

So, the trial came and went and ultimately we have the introduction of compulsory charges. What about any audit of the way in which the £46,905 was spent? Is there even any evidence of any capital





It's very clear that the car park surfaces and drainage (photos taken August 2018) are in a very poor state of repair and it is difficult to see any evidence of any capital expenditure over the last 5 years.

There is clearly a need for considerable investment to bring the car parks to an acceptable condition.

The question is: Is it justifiable for Natural Retreats to introduce mandatory parking charges given that no evidence has been publicly provided that shows how the voluntary donations were spent and in the absence of the 'audit' that was mentioned by the Mountaineering Council for Scotland?

These are the details of how Natural Retreats claims that the parking charges will be used.



PARKING BENEFITS



Thank you for contributing towards the upkeep of the CairnGorm Mountain car park and our environmental objectives.

Your money will go directly towards projects such as

- Footpath build and maintenance
- Improved car park infrastructure and surfacing
- Ranger service contributions
- Environmental projects
- Educational and interpretation initiatives
- Drainage and increased protection for Allt Mor watercourse (SSSI)
- 24-hour toilet facilities
- Improved Automated Ticketing to reduce winter queueing

With the car parks being in such a dreadful state of disrepair then it would seem reasonable to suppose that all charges should be committed to fixing them, for the foreseeable future.

Some scrutiny of the objectives set out on their information board is merited:

1. Footpath build and maintenance. There is no detail of any planned footpath construction and no evidence of the annual capital expenditure made by Natural Retreats on footpath construction and maintenance during their 4 years as lease holder.
2. Improved car park infrastructure and surfacing. We can't argue with the fact that significant investment is required.
3. Ranger Service Contributions: Natural Retreats are required to provide the ranger service and meet the costs as per their contractual obligation in their lease (having taken over responsibility for funding the service from Highlands and Islands Enterprise). Why should parking charges now be used to subsidise this service?
4. Environmental Projects: What projects? Very non specific
5. Education and interpretative initiatives: What initiatives? Very non specific. Could this be the guided walks by the Ranger Service from the top of the funicular which Natural Retreats already charge for?
6. Drainage and increased protection for the Allt Mor Watercourse. That should unquestionably be happening now.
7. 24 Hour toilet facilities: A good idea that is long overdue.
8. Improved automated ticketing to improve winter queuing. The operator ought to be financing that anyway and we can see no justification for using parking money for this purpose.

Given that there is no evidence of any of the voluntary parking fees having been committed to improving the car park surface or drainage and there has certainly been no transparency in how the funds were used then we question whether the funds raised mandatorily will be committed to the various projects as set out above.

The operator has managed to lose around 30% of their snow-sports market over the last few years and that's something that has been shown to have lost them over £1 million pounds in revenue during last winter alone. We wonder if compulsory parking charges are not simply an attempt to plug some of that gap? If they had a vibrant snow-sports business then parking charges need not be imposed

How does HIE propose to ensure that their tenant operates this scheme in an open and transparent way?

Finally, parking charges are nothing new at Cairngorm but they were abandoned as unworkable over 30 years ago. The parking charges were subsumed into the Skiing Day Ticket price where they have remained ever since. That's the reason why a Day Ticket at Cairngorm comes at a premium price compared to all of the other areas. The operator says that the scheme will be reviewed in the Autumn and a decision will be taken then about whether to charge snow-sports customers for parking or not. Making parking charges compulsory for snow-sports customers would be very ill advised and it isn't something that will encourage the many thousands who no longer ski at Cairngorm to return.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. HIE
2. natural retreats
3. secrecy
4. Tourism

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