

The collapse in standards at Cairngorm – time for the CNPA to take a lead

## **Description**

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Digger above funicular mid-station 17th October – Photo credit George Paton

If Highlands and Island Enterprise and Natural Retreats fail to fix the funicular this winter that will have a huge impact on skiing at Cairngorm and serious short-term consequences for the local economy. I understand therefore HIE are under huge pressure to act but this should not be at the cost of abandoning all standards at Cairngorm – not that, as Parkswatch has documented, many remain since Natural Retreats took over. We need to remember that when the funicular was built the greatest care was taken with excavating the pillars and the stones that were replaced were put back one by one the right way up.

**Then.....**



Construction was carried out with very little ground damage. Photo credit George Paton.

**Now.....**



Digger excavating one of the shoogly pillars 18th October (apparently the pillar below the one in the measures being taken to protect the ground. Photo Credit Gus Jones

So, what was the point of applying those high standards at the turn of the century and what has now changed?

Twenty years ago, in order to secure that EU funding, our public authorities needed to demonstrate

that the construction of the funicular would be carried out to the highest standards. Both Highland Council and SNH used the planning system to ensure these were delivered. In addition, with our public authorities breathing over them, the Cairngorm Chairlift Company ensured strict standards were applied to all operations at Cairngorm and staff, for example, could not take a vehicle out onto the hill without permission from a manager and logging it. There was even a detailed manual specifying how everything that has been done.

Since then four things have changed:

- SNH has retreated, taking almost no interest in what has gone on at Cairngorm.
- Highland Council and the CNPA have taken a far more laissez faire attitude to planning, using their discretion to allow many minor developments to go ahead without planning permission ([see here for example](#)) and not monitoring or enforcing developments that did go through the planning system ([see here for example](#)).
- HIE sold off Cairngorm Mountain to Natural Assets Investment Ltd and then gave them the lease for Cairngorm despite the Natural Retreats group not having the specialist expertise necessary to run a ski operation let alone one on such a sensitive mountain environment
- HIE then stepped back and have allowed Natural Retreats, as their tenant, and contractors whom they were ultimately paying for to ignore all standards previously agreed at Cairngorm.

The lack of any measures to protect the ground around the funicular pillars is simply a symptom of a far wider problem. In their so-called long-term strategy for Cairngorm which they submitted as part of their planning applications for both the dry ski slope and Ptarmigan, Natural Retreats promised a *"Hill track review and rationalisation"*. Meantime they continue to drive anywhere as these photos show:



Vehicles just about to join the official track, which zig zags up the Coire (from bottom right to top left) with erosion scar of “old” track below. Instead of driving vehicles up the Coire Cas track, which was granted planning permission as a replacement for the former track by the gun barrel which was claimed to be too steep, Natural Retreats staff are allowing the old track to be used as a short cut. The consequence: there are now two tracks not one. . Photo Credit George Paton 17th October.



Close up of vehicles and scar. Photo Credit George Paton.

Repair to the funicular may be urgent but not so urgent that vehicles should be allowed to take shortcuts like this. And this is just the tip of the iceberg ([see here](#)). To be fair to CNPA staff, they know this is an issue. With the proposed Ptarmigan redevelopment, they have identified an opportunity to restore the damaged ground around the building:



The damage to the ground around the Ptarmigan is extensive

CNPA staff have also asked Natural Retreats to develop standards for Cairngorm but this has been ignored despite it being very easy to do: Natural Retreats could simply re-adopt the standards and procedures which operated in the past . HIE could have insisted on this but have failed to do so.



Its time therefore, as I suggested in my last post, [What next at Cairngorm?](#), that the CNPA Board started to take a pro-active role in determining what goes on on the mountain. While I do not believe their powers under the planning system are nearly as limited as staff suggest – I would like to see HIE/Natural Retreats trying to challenge legally planning decisions which put the mountain and local community first – the CNPA have much wider statutory duties. These should inform everything that happens in the National Park, the first being conservation of landscape and wildlife and the second to promote public enjoyment of the countryside. Neither is happening at Cairngorm and the CNPA Board thus have every justification for intervening and assuming a much wider leadership role than they have done to date.

As another illustration of why the CNPA need to take a pro-active role at Cairngorm, I was struck on Saturday, travelling down the A9, by just how visible the new snow fences are:



View from the old A9 into Aviemore

Now, I am not against new snow fencing. It appears to be the main thing that Natural Retreats are investing in at Cairngorm, though it's taken four years to date and the replacement is not even complete. The point is, however, that this has taken place without ANY consideration of the landscape impact and as the photo shows that is considerable. The new fencing is far more visible from a distance than the funicular because its light colour reflects the sun. CNPA planning staff have been rightly concerned about the impact of lighting at the proposed dry ski slope (they recommended no night use of the slopes should be allowed) and the Ptarmigan (it looks like they will recommend blinds) but the impact of the new fencing is far greater. This could easily have been avoided if the fencing been painted/preserved with natural less reflective colours.

Had HIE/Natural Retreats produced a comprehensive masterplan for Cairngorm, as they had promised, CNPA staff might have been able to ensure the fencing was an appropriate colour. Given their failure to do so, there is now every reason for the CNPA Board to intervene, if their decision to refuse the dry ski slope on landscape grounds is not to be undermined by the back door.

As a start, they could ask HIE/Natural Retreats that all the remaining fencing is painted before being erected. This would provide gainful employment to staff who are without work or have been laid off while the funicular is out of operation.

Another reason for the CNPA Board to become more involved is that.....

**The problems with the funicular appear far greater than HIE is admitting**



Monitoring device opposite the Shieling sunkid tow – Photo Credit Terry Smith

While publicly HIE is maintaining that the problems with the funicular are limited to a couple of pillars, the evidence on the mountain suggests that the problems are far wider than this:



Monitoring device and thermometer just above the mid-station. Photo credit Terry Smith

Why install monitoring devices along the entire line if the problems are localised?



Monitoring device at tunnel mouth – note the apparent cracks in the t-section above. Photo credit Te

So, how many more pillars will HIE/Natural Retreats be trying to stabilise over the next few weeks?

An HIE spokesperson was quoted in the Scotsman on 18th October as saying: “*We understand that there’s huge concern and huge frustration about the funicular, but the reality is this came out the blue*” . That claim, I believe, is not true. The reports on the funicular structure, which were obtained under FOI, contain a number of indications that the line was not as it should be (which parkswatch will consider in a further post) but HIE have had their head in the sand.

The problems of course go back much further. Funicular railways in other parts of the world are almost all underground. That at Cairngorm, being overground, is exposed to everything the weather can throw at it while the ground around the pillars is subject to constant freeze thaw. While ski tows can tolerate a certain amount of ground movement, railways cannot. Whatever happens to fix the funicular this season, the fundamental problems will remain.

The CNPA is always, I believe, going to be on the backfoot unless it starts to consider the fundamental issues and develop in partnership with others a new plan that enables downhill skiing to continue at

Cairngorm in a way that is appropriate for a National Park. For that to happen, both HIE and Natural Retreats need to be removed from the mountain, with HIE retaining financial liability for the funicular and any losses incurred by the sale of Cairngorm Mountain to Natural Retreats.

### **Category**

1. Cairngorms

### **Tags**

1. CNPA
2. HIE
3. natural retreats
4. planning

### **Date Created**

October 22, 2018

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