

Dr Adam Watson, the Royal Family and the Balavil Road decision

Description

Adam Watson and the Royal family

On 24 Jan I was preparing a presentation ([see here](#)) to the planning committee of the Cairngorms National Park. This was in support of objections to a proposed new hill road on the Balavil estate in Badenoch. My preparation involved reference to material on hill tracks and roads published by Dr Adam Watson. Over many decades, from the 1950s onwards, Adam had documented and criticised the spread of these hill tracks and roads in the Cairngorms and further afield. Very sadly, in the midst of my work, news arrived of Adam's death.

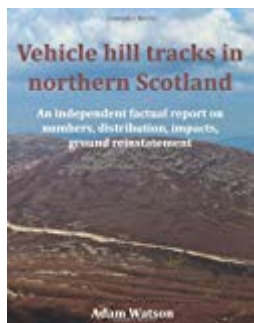
This post highlights the significance of Adam's work on this topic, its connection to the Royal Family and the relevance of hill tracks and roads to the work of the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

BBC Scotland, in the programme "Out of Doors", on 26 Jan, paid tribute to Adam through an interview ([see here at 51mins 40 secs](#)) with Professor Des Thompson, Principal Adviser on Science and Biodiversity at Scottish Natural Heritage. Des spoke about the unrivalled expertise, knowledge and dedication of Adam to ecological science, cultural heritage and education, especially of young people, from his studies in the Cairngorms. At the end of the interview (from 59.30) the following exchange took place between the presenters, Mark Steven and Euan Macillwraith:

EM: I studied ecology at university. Adam was always the heroic figure that everybody looked up to... Adam was really great to me. He always made time for me. He was one of the guys who really launched where we are today... One wee point that I can remember: Adam was one of the first people to criticise the Royal Family over the way that they were managing Balmoral estate in terms of forestry.

MS: Quite brave!

EM: At that time that was heresy. Adam told me that people spat at him in the street or crossed the road and spat at him. Such a pioneer, such a loss.



One of the many reports produced by Adam was Hill Vehicle Tracks in Northern

Scotland, published by the North East Mountain Trust in 2011. Its cover picture is a really ugly hill road built on Balmoral estate in recent times. Unfortunately Balmoral have set the standard for poor

management of the hills for far too long. Adam was not alone in explaining to the Royal Family the error of their ways. The late Dick Balharry, renowned naturalist and senior staff member of SNH and regional board member of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, spent time out on the hills with the Royal Family. All his protestations about excessive deer numbers on Balmoral, inhibiting the natural regeneration of the Old Caledonian Pinewood, came to nothing. Both men were close work colleagues and friends of myself over several decades – even these leading environmental experts were unable to persuade the Royal Family to bring their land management operations in Deeside up to modern standards.

In many discussions with Adam and Dick it became clear that no amount of discussion within Scotland was going to persuade the Royal Family to change the way they managed their deer stalking and grouse shooting in Deeside. They have always had too many advisers who live in a bygone age or believe that excessive intensification of management is the answer for our hills. I indicated in a letter to the Herald, published on 24 Dec, 2018 ([see here](#)) that such management, depriving our hills of the opportunity for the natural regeneration of trees and shrubs, has serious consequences for communities that live in the lowlands below. In Deeside the National Trust for Scotland, owners of Mar Lodge Estate, which includes the headwaters of the River Dee, has warned of the consequences of such lack of tree cover, pointing to the disastrous Deeside floods of 2015.

But this is not just a problem for Deeside. The influence of the Royal Family extends throughout the Cairngorms National Park area and beyond – too many estates copy the standards adopted on Balmoral and its neighbours, leading to excessive deer populations, proliferating new hill roads and ever more intensive burning and predator control on grouse moors. In too many places the illegal persecution of birds of prey is a feature of this national park.

Officials employed by public bodies and voluntary organisations are reluctant to apply too much pressure against these estates. Either they know that the owners have high level connections with the senior staff or board members of their own organisations or the owners are completely unknown, living in places far away from the UK, hiding behind layers of different companies set up to facilitate special tax arrangements. Disturbing such cosy arrangements by complaining about deer numbers, predator control or hill roads is generally not good news for those who aspire to a mention in the Queen's Honours Lists. Nor is it good news if, like Adam, you want to walk down the street without being spat at.

The Balavil Hill Road decision

Two days after Adam passed away I made my presentation to the CNPA planning committee. In addition to various individual objections to the proposed hill road on Balavil there were objections from seven organisations: John Muir Trust, Mountaineering Scotland, Ramblers Scotland, Scottish Wildland Group, Cairngorms Campaign, Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group and the North East Mountain Trust. The last two organisations also made public presentations to the planning committee in support of their objections.

Perhaps the most surprising comment in the Board discussion that followed appeared to come from Douglas McAdam, former Chief Executive of Scottish Land and Estates from 2006 to 2017, who was appointed to the CNPA Board in 2018. Mr McAdam's main contribution to the Balavil discussion, in

addition to his vote in favour of the planning application, seemed to be a warm endorsement of Balavil estate, welcoming their decision to apply for planning permission. This comment gave the impression that complying with the law in this way was an unusual event in the Cairngorms – other landowners it seemed are more inclined to build their new hill roads without proper authorisation and wait for the CNPA or Highland Council to find out about this illegal activity and chase them up retrospectively. This is confirmed by the latest CNPA planning news ([see here](#)) which refers to “multiple enforcement investigations” – see below.

I wondered why I was not being congratulated for arriving at the meeting wearing my seat belt! It left the impression that ordinary citizens are expected to comply with the law in the Cairngorms, but for big landowners this is a luxury, worthy of special mention.

Not surprisingly, with this landowner love-in, the outcome of the meeting was approval of the planning application by 9 votes to 6. At least a motion for rejection, proposed by locally elected members from Badenoch and Moray, rocked the boat somewhat, demonstrating that 6 members had appreciated that this new road was a gross intrusion into one of Scotland's top Wild Land Areas. They probably also realised that the new road was unnecessary. A perfectly viable alternative hill road is available on the adjacent estate, so long as the CNPA could be persuaded to do one of the main tasks it was set up to do – to facilitate cooperation between neighbouring grouse moor owners, which should include joint use of hill roads where appropriate.



A multiple set of ATV tracks branching off the existing hill road at Balavil. Should this damage be replaced by the CNPA agreeing a permanent road here or are other

solutions required? Photo taken 23.01.19 Credit Tom Leatherland

It is quite clear from the CNPA decision to approve this planning application that they have opened the flood gates to further hill track and road development throughout Scotland. Within the Park the CEO, Grant Moir, has already flagged up the problem, now saying that the Park “*has multiple enforcement investigations underway*”. Any landowner who wants to build a new road up a hill or deep into wild country anywhere in Scotland now knows that, as a result of the CNPA decision, all they have to do is repeatedly drive All Terrain Vehicles across the landscape so that prominent visual scars are produced. They then turn to their local planning authority and seek planning approval to replace the scar with a constructed road on which all types of vehicle can then be driven, resulting in a permanent, obtrusive long ribbon stretching across mountain and moor. In support of these planning applications landowners are likely to reference the CNPA decision on the Balavil hill road. If it is OK to ravage the heart of a Wild Land area in a national park with repeated ATV use and replace that damage with even worse damage with a permanent road then it is OK to repeat the process anywhere else. Members of Scottish Land and Estates will be delighted that their former CEO is performing so well on the CNPA Board while, in the background, the glasses will be raised in Balmoral castle.

How to tackle the power of landowners?

During the last few years Adam Watson and Dick Balharry, along with a wider network of individuals had become increasingly concerned about lack of progress within the Cairngorms National Park area in meeting its conservation objectives. We concluded that, with the level of influence applied by big estate owners on officials in public bodies within Scotland, there was no real possibility that the fossilisation of upland land use practices in the Cairngorms would change any time soon. External expertise and pressure would appear to be the only solution.

That is why Adam Watson, right up to the time of his death, his mental capacities undimmed at the age of 88, was helping to prepare a formal complaint to the European Commission. This will be submitted before the Brexit deadline (29 March at present). This ensures that the EC investigation will continue past this deadline even though the UK is no longer a member state of the European Union. It will allege failings by the UK and Scottish Governments over the last 25 years to properly abide by EC policies and directives relating to wildlife habitat, landscape and wild land protection. It will call on the EC to appoint experts from within the UK and further afield to examine what is happening on the ground and to make recommendations or issue instructions for improvement. It will be proposed that specific areas and situations, such as those on estates at Balmoral and elsewhere in the Cairngorms are looked at in detail. The outcome should be based on sound evidence, exactly what Adam was arguing for throughout his long life.

As Mark Steven said on BBC Scotland, Adam Watson was “quite brave” in criticising the Royal Family over their management of the Balmoral estate. The rest of us must now have the courage to complete Adam’s work. His finest memorial would surely be to see deer and grouse management on the Royal estates undergo fundamental change, setting an example to others. Balmoral and Delnadamph need to become models of best practice, copied throughout the Cairngorms National Park, and thereby setting a world standard for the protection and use of mountains and moorlands.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. hill tracks
3. landed estates
4. planning

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