

The battle for Cairn Gorm and the National Park's "working principles".

Description

CONFIDENTIAL SESSION

Motion to consider following item in confidential session

II. FOR DECISION Cairngorm Mountain *Grant Moir, CEO*

Extract from CNPA Board Agenda 29th March

I had been meaning to follow up why the last meeting of the Cairngorms National Park Authority Board had held a confidential discussion on Cairngorm Mountain when last week the Cairngorms National Park Authority published a new document., "*Cairngorm Mountain – CNPA Working Principles*". An email to the Cairngorms National Park Authority established that the purpose of the Confidential Session had been to discuss and agree the set of principles to guide any future development/management of Cairn Gorm and this was the one and only product from the meeting.

While parkswatch has consistently campaigned for far greater transparency in how our National Parks operate, public authority boards do sometimes need to discuss matters in private. My own experience as a former Board Member is that once discussions have taken place, usually their outcome can be made public. Whether or not the discussion did need to be in private in this case, I welcome the publication of what was agreed.

The principles themselves appear fine, as far as they go, taking quite a broad perspective albeit rather vague and likely to mean different things to different people.

Cairngorm Mountain - CNPA

1. Cairngorm and Glenmore are together an iconic National Park. The area attracts around 40% of all visitors to Scotland. The area is owned by the Scottish Government on behalf of the people of Scotland. The area is managed by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the National Trust for Scotland and Land Scotland.
2. The area is of great importance for recreation and tourism. The area's management is crucial for the local economy.
3. The CNPA Board agreed at its meeting on 29 March 2017 the work of the CNPA on Cairngorm Mountain should be based on a framework for developing work with partners:
 - a) Any proposals should fit with the National Park Development Plan and the Cairngorm Mountain Development Plan
 - b) Any proposals should be part of a master plan for the proposed new Local Development Plan
 - c) Any proposals should be cognisant of the need for long term sustainability.
 - d) Cairngorm Mountain should provide a range of facilities and uplift commensurate with the area's status
 - e) Cairngorm Mountain should provide opportunities for the public to engage with the area's natural and cultural heritage

Their publication raises two interesting questions.

Why did the CNPA produce these working principles?

In theory our public authorities are supposed to work together and, with “Natural Retreats” off the landscape, its hard to see why there would be any need for a document like this had Highlands Islands Enterprise started to work closely with the CNPA, . The problem of course is that HIE has for over thirty years proved incapable of working with anyone at Cairngorm Mountain, whether other public agencies or community organisations. Hence the need, for example, for the CNPA to include a reference to the Glenmore Strategy in the Working Principles document. HIE has never produced the Cairngorm Estate Management Plan it agreed to deliver as part of that strategy back in September 2016,

Reading between the lines therefore it appears that, whatever work they have done “together” since Cairngorm Mountain Ltd went into administration, the CNPA still does not exactly trust HIE. Hence why its decided to go public and publish a set of working principles. Its a way of the CNPA strengthening its hand. That the CNPA feels a need to say, after years of grandiose plans and financial mismanagement, that *“the operational model for Cairngorm Mountain needs to be fit for the purpose and affordable in the long-term”* suggests that HIE is still in cloud cuckoo land.

Will the working principles have any effect on HIE?

While I could be wrong, the publication of the working principles, however well-intentioned, appears to be a sign of weakness, not of strength. They suggest that the CNPA has been unable to get HIE to sign up voluntarily. Had they been able to do so, the Working Principles could have been presented as a joint agreement between HIE and CNPA. It will be interesting to see if the HIE Board now discuss them and even more interesting to learn their response.

Had the CNPA been in a position of strength at Cairn Gorm, rather than adopting a set of principles for its own use, it might have issued them as a draft for consultation with everyone who has an interest in Cairn Gorm, from local residents and businesses to national recreational and conservation organisations. This is what needs to happen at Cairn Gorm, instead of HIE’s “vision documents” with proposals presented on a take it or leave it basis. Unfortunately the CNPA does not appear strong enough to do this. Or to put it another way, Roseanna Cunningham, the Cabinet Secretary ultimately responsible for our National Parks is not strong enough to take on Fergus Ewing, the Cabinet Secretary responsible for HIE and the mismanagement of Cairn Gorm.

While you might regard some of this as speculation, the working principles are already being put to the test by HIE’s decision to go ahead with the Planning Application to redevelop the Ptarmigan at the top of Cairn Gorm. The Working Principles clearly state that *“Any proposals should be part of a masterplan for the ski area as per the proposed Local Development Plan”*. On 2nd May, i.e AFTER the publication of the Working Principles, HIE or its agents lodged a “revised” Design and Access

Statement for the Ptarmigan on the Park's Planning Portal ([see here](#)). There is no reference within the document to how this fits with the masterplan the CNPA is calling for and no indication that there is any intention to produce a masterplan. Hardly an indication that HIE has taken any cognisance of the Working Principles. It will be most interesting to see what the CNPA now does. If, however, the Planning Application goes ahead without a masterplan it will be fair to conclude that the boot is still firmly on HIE's foot.

The wider picture

Thankfully, pressure for HIE to start acting in the public interest, continues to build from elsewhere. After the terrible winter for downhill skiing, Ski Scotland has called for £10m to be invested in Scotland's five ski resorts – including Cairn Gorm – to enable them to adapt to global warming and survive ([see here](#)). This was most interesting. Ski Scotland appears to believe that for around £2m, the skiing at Cairn Gorm could be improved significantly. That's quite a contrast to the £27m "vision" HIE launched last year ([see here](#)). It also seems to fit quite well with the CNPA's working principles which call for future proposals to be "affordable" and take account of global warming.

On the 1st May Susan Smith, the new Chief Executive at Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd and former HIE member of staff responsible for appointing and managing Natural Retreats, attended a working breakfast with members of the Cairngorm Business Partnership along with James Gibb from HIE. The meeting was in response to pressure from Local Businesses to find out what is happening at Cairn Gorm Mountain.

Little of substance appears to have been revealed. HIE admitted there were problems with the funicular pier foundations, piers, beams and bearings but wouldn't say when the engineers report would be made public or what the cost of any repairs might be. HIE admitted that the base station café was in a bad state, floated some ideas for generating income and interest over the summer but presented no clear plan. Someone asked whether had CMSL canvassed walkers using the car parks to find out what facilities they would appreciate at the base station. The only response was that that was a good idea. Susan Smith admitted, according to my sources, that nothing could have prepared her for the mess she found on taking over – a mess HIE was responsible for due to their lack of management – but without revealing how she planned to get out of this. She was also quizzed about the viability of the various ideas presented by SE Group in their report on the £27m vision for Cairn Gorm and had no real answers apart from this is what "highly experienced" consultants recommended.

All this provides yet more evidence that HIE really does not have the expertise or right attitudes to manage Cairngorm Mountain and that local businesses are only too aware of this. Whether they will be [prepared to start lobbying publicly to have HIE removed from Cairn Gorm remains to be seen.

What needs to happen

While I am sure the CNPA's working principles are well-intentioned, they are unlikely to have any effect until the Scottish Government decides to transfer the ownership of Cairn Gorm and responsibility for its

management away from HIE.

The Scottish Government should agree to no new proposals from HIE until a comprehensive and independent review of what has gone wrong with the strategy, management and finances of the facilities on Cairn Gorm and the lessons learned to prevent yet another failure. That will almost certainly require an inquiry by the Scottish Parliament.

Part of this should include comparison with what has been achieved by the other four ski centres which, while they have had their difficulties and need some public support, have achieved more with far less. Part also should also include consideration of what a future without the funicular might look like and what opportunities this could create for visitors.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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