

Give HIE an inch at Cairn Gorm and they will take a mile – the Ptarmigan and ATV tourism

Description

[Update 5/7/19: following publication of this post HIE's subsidiary Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd appear to have backtracked, having announced the ATV experience will be limited to the road up the Ptarmigan and is unlikely to take place more than once a month ([see here](#)). That appears a tacit admission that their original proposal was contrary to the Section 50 agreement]

Last week Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd launched its "ATV experience". £60 per person for a two hour trip up Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)). Its not all that long ago that vehicle use in the ski area was strictly controlled to protect the fragile environment. Staff, I understand, had to obtain permission before they could use a vehicle beyond the Coire Cas car park. This though was dispensed with as being too bureaucratic.

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The consequences of unrestricted ATV use are now visible all over the ski area

The Cairngorms Estate Management Plan, 2016-21, does still however contain some provisions for vehicle use:

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| <p>1.1.8 Staff access by vehicle will be kept to a minimum, restricted to agreed routes and will adhere to the Vehicle Use Protocol.</p> | <p>All areas, especially Developed Area</p> | <p>Summer season and over snow in winter</p> |
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While under Natural Retreats staff were then allowed to drive vehicles all over the hill, creating considerable damage, damage which Highlands and Islands Enterprise did nothing to stop. However, HIE's promotion of ATV tourism goes way beyond this.

All Terrain Vehicle tourism and the Section 50 agreement at Cairn Gorm

Had the Ptarmigan remained open, it might have been just about understandable why CMSL might have thought it a good idea to offer visitors, unable to walk up, a taxi ride to the restaurant while the funicular remained broken.

That, however, is not what is being offered:

"Here at Cairngorm Mountain in the beautiful Cairngorms National Park we're offering the most unforgettable ATV experience. Ideal for bird watching groups, walkers or a great way to celebrate a special occasion."

The *"unforgettable ATV experience"* appears to be in breach of the Section 50 agreement on management of visitors at Cairn Gorm which was introduced to protect the Special Area of Conservation which surrounds the ski area. It is still legally still binding.

One of its requirements was *"responsible marketing"*:

Cairngorm Chairlift Company will:

- ***continue to promote environmental awareness and responsibility in marketing and promotional material;***
- ***work with other partners to monitor relevant marketing & promotional campaigns and to ensure, so far as it is in their direct control, that given to the public are consistent with visitor management objectives and will supplement the visitor monitoring information set out in Appendix 1.***

The current operator, Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd, is the legal successor to the Cairngorm Chairlift Company and inherits its obligations

How is promoting off road use of vehicles which is trashing the natural beauty of the Cairngorms National Park responsible marketing? Isn't regular use of vehicles up the mountain likely to disturb birds more, reducing the wildlife experience for those in vehicles as well as walkers? And how is sitting in a vehicle *"ideal"* for walkers unless HIE is going to allow CSML to allow people to walk over the plateau after their lift up? This is not responsible tourism marketing.

The Section 50 Agreement was also specifically designed to prevent the number of "non-skiing visitors"

accessing the plateau from increasing, hence the closed funicular system. The fact that few self-respecting walkers would pay for a £60 taxi ride to save a half hour walk is irrelevant. The Section 50 is worded in a way that people transported up the mountain by ATV come under the category of “non-skiing visitors” and are therefore covered by the Visitor Management Plan.

Back in 1997 when the VMP was prepared the very idea of ATV trips at Cairn Gorm would have been inconceivable and could indeed have stopped the whole funicular project. The VMP requires annual monitoring of visitor numbers and associated impacts on vegetation and erosion in both the ski area and the surrounding areas.

An integrated set of management principles were defined for each zone, encompassing visitor management, environmental quality, provision and maintenance of infrastructure and monitoring. These are reproduced in Appendix 2.

In terms of visitor management, key objectives were:

- to contain the bulk of summer visitor activity to an agreed area (the Ski Area zone) within the Ski Area;
- to educate/inform visitors about the sensitivity of the Cairn Gorm environment and the need for management intervention;
- to enhance the overall quality of the visitor experience; and
- to monitor the impact of summer visitors in order to guide future visitor management regimes.

The number and impact of visitors will be increased by use of ATVs and therefore come under the VMP. There are two questions therefore. Have CMSL and HIE prepared a revised VMP to take account of ATV tourism? And have they sought agreement from the Planning Authority and SNH who are the sole arbiters of the meaning of the S50 agreement and what is allowed under it?

(FOURTEENTH) (a) *Subject to Clause EIGHTFENTH hereof, the Planning Authority and SNH shall be the sole arbiters of whether action to be taken by the Applicant under the terms of this Agreement has been satisfactorily taken;*

HIE’s ATV tourism initiative is therefore very much a matter that should concern both SNH and the Cairngorms National Park Authority (as ultimate Planning Authority for the area). Both need to respond (I will be asking them today!).

ATV use and the road up to the Ptarmigan

While I am sure that HIE and CMSL, if given half a chance, would do anything for money, including driving visitors all round the ski area, if challenged by SNH and the CNPA, my suspicion is they will claim is that all they ever intended to do was to drive visitors up the road to the Ptarmigan.



The middle section of the road up Coire Cas

The Ptarmigan road certainly doesn't provide a "visitor experience" fitting for a National Park and I suspect if word gets around that this is all you get for your £60 the whole thing would collapse as a business venture. The road was originally intended to be temporary and removed once work on the funicular had been completed. Highland Council then approved a further planning application to allow it to remain but for occasional use. Planning creep.



The start of the road down from the Ptarmigan showing the impact of vehicles on gravelly soils

That was why when Natural Retreats originally submitted the Planning Application last year to expand the Ptarmigan they proposed to take construction materials up by the funicular and by helicopter. When HIE bought back Cairn Gorm Ltd at the end of last year, the main change to the planning application was the proposal that construction materials should be brought in by road ([see here](#)) rather than by helicopter. This was justified on the basis that helicopters could threaten birdlife.

Unfortunately the CNPA accepted this argument hook, line and sinker. How is it that helicopters have been used for mountain rescues for years all over the plateau without anyone expressing concern for birdlife? No attempt was made to compare the impact of making the road fit for construction purposes with a couple of helicopter trips to bring in materials (yes, and the fuel consumption of helicopters should have been factored into this). Instead, the CNPA approved the use of the road subject to these

conditions:

- 6 No development shall commence on site until an Outdoor Access Management Plan has been submitted to and approved by the Cairngorms National Park Authority acting in consultation with the Highland Council Traffic Department. The plan shall:**
- a) Refer to the approved outdoor access management plan;**
 - b) Reflect the proposals for no helicopter access to the site;**
 - c) Detail any works to the access track;**
 - d) Include a plan of the site set up, construction and operation.**

Thereafter all construction works shall be in accordance with the approved plan;

Once given the inch, HIE have of course seized the mile. It makes one wonder if their main reason for pursuing the Ptarmigan Planning Application, which appears senseless while the funicular is broken, was in fact to sanction increased use of the road.

While their position is weakened by the planning decision, the CNPA could still insist that HIE/CMSL clarify how these tourism ATV trips fit with either the Section 50 agreement or the measures set out in the outdoor access management plan for the Ptarmigan construction which they agreed last November ([see here](#)). The intention behind that plan was to prevent construction traffic using the road impinging on rights of access and enjoyment of the area by the public. Those intentions are equally applicable to ATV tourism, which will destroy the experience for people walking up the mountain and are likely to impact on wildlife.

The CNPA could also make it very clear to HIE/CMSL that they will sanction NO improvements to the road BEFORE a construction method statement has been approved for any repairs/upgrade to the road.

All of this would be perfectly compatible with the CNPA's explanation for the conditions it issued as part

of the Ptarmigan approval, which included the following:

- 4 To ensure that there are no adverse impacts on National Park and to conserve and enhance the landscape in accordance with Policy 4: Natural Heritage of the Cairngorms Local Development Plan 2015;
- 5 To ensure that work on site proceeds without conflict in accordance with Policy 4: Natural Heritage and Policy 10: Resources of the Cairngorms Local Development Plan 2015;
- 6 To ensure that the site is appropriately accessed and that access upon the environment in accordance with Policy 4: Natural Heritage and Sustainable Design of the Cairngorms Local Development Plan 2015;
- 7 To ensure that work there are no adverse impacts on water and that water is appropriately managed in accordance with Policy 10: Resources of the Cairngorms Local Development Plan 2015;

In addition to these specific planning matters, the ATV tourism initiative appears incompatible with the working principles the CNPA Board agreed in March should cover all development at Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)). How, for example, does ATV tourism fit with the National Park Partnership Plan, the Cairngorm and Glenmore Strategy or the statement that summer visitors should be “close to nature and wildness”?

What needs to happen

The ATV tourism initiative provides yet another example that HIE is totally unfit to manage Cairn Gorm. For thirty years now they have been gradually eroding the principles and plans that were adopted to protect the fragile environment on Cairn Gorm. Step by step they are trying to turn the mountain into their idea of a tourist resort, one that is incompatible with the principles of a National Park.

The Cairngorms National Park Authority and Scottish Natural Heritage both have statutory powers which they could use to stop this and its time they acted. They should not be afraid to act because of the inevitable outcry from people with vested interests that ATV tourism will save the business or benefit the local economy. It won't.

Two weeks ago a new locally based group, calling themselves the Campaign for a Better Cairngorm was publicly launched ([see here for their website](#)). They stand for exactly for the opposite of what HIE is trying to do at Cairn Gorm and want our public authorities to put the mountain first:

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Outdoors writer Chris Townsend, who is based just out of Cairngorm need to be in harmony with the landscape, not

“I think this is a totally inappropriate location for funfair atmosphere that the vast majority of walkers and climbers experience and enjoy.” said Tim Hall, who runs “Out in

Roy Brown, a keen downhill skier from Carrbridge, could see investment from ski uplift. Successive owners and managers have focus on summer attractions while removing winter uplift for winter sports visitors. Cairngorm has repeatedly failed to have flourished.”

Paul Webster, from Walkhighlands, based in Cromdale, says the worst weather is simply the wrong place for family-fun on low ground or in forestry where they won't be affected by the enjoyment of other visitors. In summer, Cairngorm could start providing the sort of environment and experience that is the heart of our National Park.”

Gordon Bulloch, owner of the Dulaig B&B in Grantown, says we have no faith in HIE making viable decisions on the potential projects throughout the Strath which could provide. Let's forget the fanciful ideas of a mountain roller coaster and improving the fragile high streets of our towns and villages.

Cairn Gorm just because it owns the land, and go back

The Campaign complements the Save the Ciste Group, which has done so much to expose the destruction and mismanagement of the winter skiing experience at Cairn Gorm, and intends, I understand, to work closely with that group and conservation groups like the Cairngorms Campaign and North East Mountain Trust. Lets hope it makes one of its first priorities to stop ATV tourism at Cairn Gorm in its tracks.

Category

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Date Created

July 2, 2019

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