

The Cairngorm Snowfactory Fiasco

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TechnoAlpin SF200 SnowFactory

The Snowfactory at the top of the Coire Cas Carpark is 8m tall and stands sentinel to HIE's bureaucratic mismanagement at Cairn Gorm.

A snowfactory trial was undertaken at CairnGorm during the winter of 2017/18. That was a direct response to the Aviemore Business Association exhorting the Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for HIE, Fergus Ewing MSP, to do everything possible to bolster the numbers coming to Cairn Gorm to ski/board because the market share had been declining, at an alarming rate, over the previous seasons. The snowsports market share had been falling as Cairngorm, under Natural Retreats, haemorrhaged customers who were going to the other Scottish centres where the product/service was superior. That led directly to HIE organizing a trial of a TechnoAlpin SF100 Snowfactory which was installed at CairnGorm for use during December/January and then at the Lecht during February/March 2018.

The trial ran into problems at Cairngorm because the system filters were becoming clogged with fine particles that hadn't been effectively filtered out of the burn water before it reached the Snowfactory. HIE then commissioned Hall Aitken, a Glasgow based consultancy, to undertake an analysis of snowmaking at the Scottish Centres. Their report, published in August 2018, had this for CairnGorm:

"The trial was inconclusive and the system needs further evaluation from their perspective"

and

"with a short trial and some technical problems, it would be fair to say that the Cairngorm trial was inconclusive"

In October 2018 the CairnGorm Funicular was closed for safety reasons. That led to HIE hurriedly organizing the purchase of a TechnoAlpin SF200 Snowfactory (and 8 snow cannons) for use on Cairngorm at a cost that was close to £1m. It is well enough documented that the Snowfactory then ran into technical difficulties during the 2018/19 winter season with fine dust particles again clogging filters. It seems then that the conclusions from the Hall Aitken consultancy report were correct and the system did need further trialing to overcoming the technical problems. However, the situation was made much worse by the closure of the Snowfactory in February 2019 for Health and Safety reasons. It seems that there was a slip and fall hazard present when work was being undertaken to clean the filters.

Readers should understand that HIE purchased a SF200 Snowfactory which was not the model involved in the trial. It is therefore unsurprising that difficulties were encountered which would not have become apparent during the trial of the smaller SF100 Snowfactory. It is only a single storey high, unlike the 'double decker' SF200. HIE therefore ignored the consultancy report findings and ran into considerable difficulties because the SF200 Snowfactory had not been trialed and because the water filtration difficulties had not been resolved.

The situation at Cairngorm now is that the SF200 Snowfactory is stranded at its site at the top of the Coire Cas carpark. Even when dismantled to each separate container, there is no way to transport it higher up the hill using the already overused hill track. Any lorry, loaded with a Snowfactory container, will be unable to pass beneath the Funicular track as it crosses over the hill track.

The present site is inefficient because the factory made snow must be pumped and pushed uphill which will restrict the distance it can be utilized and increases the costs associated with pushing and grooming it. The only way that the snowfactory use can be optimized would be to move it up the hill to a position where the snow could be pushed [mostly] downhill.

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Possible Snowfactory site, adjacent to the Carpark T-Bar uptrack

The poles delineate an area part way up the Carpark T-Bar uptrack which may indicate the preferred site for the Snowfactory. Unfortunately, there is no way to reach this area unless a significant load bearing track is constructed to there from the Coire Cas Carpark. It can be expected that any such planning application would rightfully be met with considerable environment opposition. The evidence from previous works would suggest that very considerable damage could be caused by construction and that measures to protect the ground may be inadequate.

The use of the Snowfactory, from its present location, with the snow being used to create a learners' area, has itself created damage to the vegetation and the peat beneath. The evidence is there to be seen with 'scalping' by Kassbohrers and even now, in early July, there has been no attempt to undertake any remedial attention

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Vegetation and ground that has been 'scalped' by Kassbohrers

If HIE had taken the time to thoroughly evaluate the pros and cons then they could have decided to purchase the modular version of the SF100 Snowfactory which is presently being installed at Nevis Range. It can be flown into inaccessible areas and constructed on-site. There would then have been no need to consider [yet another] hill track and all of the negative PR that will come with such a planning application would be avoided. In that way, there could have been 2 small snowfactories in Coire Cas which could, with assistance from the TR8 Snowcannons, have adequately covered the lower areas in Coire Cas. We spoke to another Scottish Snowsports area owner and it was his view that HIE had purchased the wrong thing at CairnGorm:

"the SF100 Snowfactory is a bit less efficient than the larger SF200 but you can only push and pump the snow so far and [by buying one] you have all your eggs in one basket"

The use of the untried SF200 Snowfactory when measured against the number of skier days recorded at CairnGorm last winter, was unsuccessful. According to the figures issued by HIE, there were just 4,514 skier days recorded. That was a commercial disaster on the hill where the costs involved in making the snow would not even have been met by the total income generated from snowsports. If HIE's published figure is correct then there can be no conclusion other than the local economy gained little or no benefit, last winter.

We are now hearing that a permanent learning area is to be installed outside the Daylodge with the inclusion of a 'Magic Carpet' for uplift. This is the latest uplift priority on CairnGorm. This is an ill-conceived proposal to help to justify the significant costs involved with the SF200 Snowfactory. The area in question is arguably too small to accommodate large number of beginners and early learners being too narrow and too steep. In 60 years it has never been considered as a beginners/learning area and neither should it be now. There are no direct progression routes from here and it should be ruled out just on that basis alone. However, there are also unacceptable proposals to landscape this area. The SE Group in the latest addendum to their 2018 report has this:

"... 'summer grading.... removing stumps, hollows and rocks to create a smoother surface is proposed for the lower mountain'

Given the recent history on the hill, that very much sounds like bringing in the bulldozers.

HIE have previously had the opportunity to take forward the proposals to install small scale run of river Hydro Schemes on CairnGorm but they ignored the possibilities in both 2012 and 2015. Last winter the Snowfactory was powered by the use of a large generator which burned 34,375 litres of diesel, even though it was out of operation after early February. There is no evidence or information to indicate that there will be any change to that strategy during next winter. How then does that fit with the aim of the National Park: to promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the area?

Summary of current position

1. The SF 200 snowfactory was relatively unsuccessful during the 2018/19 season
2. HIE ignored the finding in the consultancy report that they commissioned.

3. HIE purchased something that had not been trialed and unsurprisingly met with unknown difficulties.
4. The SF200 Snowfactory is stranded in the Coire Cas carpark.
5. A new hill track may be under consideration.
6. An ill-conceived beginners/early learners area is being proposed for outside the Daylodge.
7. Landscaping is being planned for the proposed learning area outside the Daylodge.

An alternative option

HIE could return the SF200 Snowfactory to TechnoAlpin and obtain two modular versions of the SF100 SnowFactory, paying the price difference and transport costs. That would enable them to be sited in the optimum positions where only foundations would be required but without the need to construct expensive and unwanted hill tracks. That would of course require HIE to admit to their original purchase decision being erroneous.

What should happen now

The snowfactory provides yet another example of HIE's incompetence of lack of fitness to operate the ski area. Scottish Government should intervene and transfer the CairnGorm Estate, the hill business and its assets to Forestry & Land Scotland along with the funds required to rebuild the business. That would remove all of the HIE 'baggage' from the hill and allow a Community Asset transfer to progress unhindered by HIE's intransigence and incompetence.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. HIE
4. landscape
5. natural retreats
6. restoration
7. Scottish Government

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Author

alan-bratney