

Bid to improve ski area for beginners

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CAIRNGORM Mountain has lodged plans which they have said will help create a beginners ski area which will not rely on natural snow to function.

They want to smooth and regrade parts of the lower slopes through engineering works to make them more snow friendly.

The planning application has been lodged by Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL) with Highland Council's Badenoch and Strathspey planning service.

Supporting information with the proposal states: "These works will help create a guaranteed beginners area without reliance on natural snow.

"This will increase the potential of opening snow-sports earlier in the season by using snowmaking and increasing the skiable snow cover days to the base of the Cairngorm ski area."

The company points



Youngsters learning to ski at the beginners area on the lower slopes of Cairngorm Mountain last winter.

out that last winter the Snowfactory combined with eight fan guns created the longest ever man-made snow piste in the UK at more than 900 metres in length.

CMSL states: "Future smoothing and grading works are critical to maximise the potential of

snowmaking on the lowest pistes of the mountain."

The practice is often referred to as "summer grooming" within the ski industry.

Cairngorm ski bosses want to fill in several hollows and ditches above the car park tow as part of "smoothing improvements";

as well as some other key areas.

The report states: "By infilling the large depressions the amount of produced snow needed to get the beginners area into operation will be reduced creating a wider area of usable snow in a short time."

CMSL has said this will lead to time and energy savings ever year. Another advantage is that the home run to the base station will be improved for all levels of skiers and boarders.

Following the closure of the funicular last September, the Ptarmigan bowl for learners at the top of the mountain is now out of reach and last season all teaching for new skiers was on the lower slopes.

Resort bosses said they had spoken to stakeholders including local ski schools before lodging the plans.

■ Questions still remain over the two-year wait for £5000 worth of donations to local charities following the sale of scrap metal from the

chairlift pylons in Coire na Ciste.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise had told the Ciste campaigners "the contractor is presently pulling together the paperwork received from the local scrap merchant to establish the final value of the scrap metal debris. Details can be provided in due course."

That announcement brought a swift reaction from local scrap merchants David Ritchie and Sons Ltd asking the Strathy to point out that they were not involved in any way with the project.

Contractors McGowan Environmental Engineering Ltd of Aviemore, confirmed as much this week. But as to the identity of the scrap merchant involved, director Ross Smith said: "We are unable to confirm the name of our scrap merchant as we consider this to be commercially sensitive information which we do not share externally. I can confirm our merchant was not David Ritchie and Sons Ltd."

A couple of

weeks ago Highlands and Islands Enterprise lodged yet another planning application for Cairn Gorm, this time for the creation of a beginners ski area above the day lodge ([see here for planning documents](#)). James Gibb from HIE made no mention of this at the meeting organised by the Aviemore and Community Trust where he claimed that HIE were committed to producing a masterplan at Cairn Gorm. There is no sight of that and meantime the individual planning applications keep rolling in (the Ptarmigan, the car park play tube and now this) while HIE has also advertised for a Project Manager to manage the repair of the funicular ([see here](#)) BEFORE they have indicated the likely cost of doing so. Thankfully the Cairngorms National Park Authority, whose Board in March asked HIE to produce a masterplan BEFORE they submitted any further planning applications, have decided to call in the beginners ski area application. That means the CNPA Board will take the decision.

The idea behind the proposal is to better use of the snow created by the new snow making machines by flattening out the slopes. HIE's argument is this will avoid "wasting" snow on filling in hollows.



The red shading depicts the areas where extensive engineering is proposed

While ostensibly for the benefit of skiers and proposed in the SE Group report on the uplift infrastructure for skiing at Cairn Gorm, it makes little sense in terms of skiing:

- First, the area is too low down the mountain and Coire Cas is very exposed to the weather. HIE need to decide where the snow machines are most likely to make a difference BEFORE taking decisions about a beginners area.
- Second, one of the prime arguments for the funicular was to be able to ferry beginners up the mountain to the Ptarmigan bowl. If that is no longer suitable for beginners, HIE should say so but that removes one of the main arguments for repairing it!
- Third, two years ago HIE paid for the installation of the shieling rope arguing that a beginners areas was needed lower down the mountain. In the course of the construction, they allowed the whole area to be flattened. Why is another flattened ski area now required and wouldn't it be better to move the snow making machines uphill so snow could be created where the lift is as Alan Bratney and others have argued?
- Fourth, locating the snow making machines by the car park has been beset with difficulties due to the high levels of grit in the water there. As this post will show, this appears partially a consequence of the creation of a new track by the Shieling Rope tow and is likely to become even worse if further engineering works to the ski slopes are allowed.
- Fifth, the SE group report which suggested a beginner's area here included proposals for a magic carpet which would be installed once the area was flattened. Why is there no mention of this in the Planning Application?

All these issues are never going to be resolved so long as HIE continues punting individual planning applications at Cairn Gorm with no consideration of how these will all fit together. A masterplan for ALL ski infrastructure is desperately needed - the problem is HIE is not the organisation to do this, it has neither the knowledge, the skills or the vision necessary.

The likely environmental impacts of engineering a new beginners' ski area



Water pouring down the Coire Cas car park on 10th August in one of the downpours that has hit the area. Sooner or later volumes of water like this are going to cause extensive damage, both on the m below. What impact will the beginners ski area have on this? Photo credit Alan Bratney.

In my post on the damage down by the recent downpours in our National Parks ([see here](#)), I featured a couple of photos of erosion damage at the Shieling Track (included again below) BEFORE the recent downpours (and Aviemore has experienced some of the heaviest rain in Scotland). Whatâ??s happened at the Shieling should give the CNPA every reason it needs to demand HIE provide a full independent assessment of what impact the proposed development will have on water run-off and erosion.

Regular readers will recall how HIE failed to supervise Natural Retreats when installing the shieling rope tow and how far more extensive works were undertaken than were granted planning permission ([see here](#)). Having then failed to save sufficient vegetation to restore the slope they had scraped clean, Natural Retreats then applied for retrospective planning permission to create a new track running alongside the new piste ([see here](#)). Parkswatch and others, including the North East Mountain Trust,

argued that the track was too steep and straight would as a consequence erode and that the ground should be fully restored. The CNPA rejected these concerns and granted planning permission on the basis that the track could be restored properly.

The latest photos from July 2019 show that the CNPA were wrong and the critics were right. The track is clearly eroding at a rapid rate and material is being washed down the mountain.



Granitic Material is being washed down the steepest section of track, has almost completely filled in bars and has covered much of the vegetation alongside the track. Photo courtesy of Alan Bratney.

In the Committee Report to the Board about the Shieling track the following claim was made:

â??Local Development Plan Policy 4: Natural Heritage seeks to ensure that new development does not adversely affect the quality of the environment or species. Policy 10: Resources seeks to ensure that new development avoids unacceptable detrimental impacts on the water environment. The proposals have been fully assessed with regard to any significant impact upon habitats and species by CNPA

officers and it is considered that there are no adverse ecological impacts. There is also potential, as result of the proposed landscaping together with the formation of sedimentation ponds, for surface water drainage to improve biodiversity. As such the application is considered to comply with Policy 4 and 10.â?•

The photos, I believe, show that claim was totally wrong. CNPA officers need to learn from past mistakes.



The reseeded along the edge of track and of the central strip has not prevented large amounts of gravel from being eroded and washed down the track. Photo courtesy of Alan Bratney.

All this damage has happened in a couple of years. What will this track be like in two years time or even after the recent downpours?



Besides the obvious erosion note the filled in water bar bottom left. Photo courtesy of Alan Bratney.

Moreover, Condition 1 of the Planning consent required *“landscaping, drainage and groundworks having to be completed by May 2018 and thereafter **maintained** in accordance with approval.”* There is no evidence of HIE or Cairn Gorm Mountain Scotland Ltd having undertaken any maintenance this year which has added to the problems.



Infilled silt trap below the shieling track designed to reduce the amount of grit washed down the mountain. The trap would never have been needed if the planners do not anticipate the track would continue to erode. The traps were supposed to be regularly emptied. Photo Credit Alan Bratney.

The infilled silt traps add to the suspicion that the Shieling track may be the source of some of the grit that has been blocking the filters of the snow making machines. If not, however, damage done by uncontrolled vehicle use elsewhere on the mountain and subsequent erosion – i.e. by Natural Retreats and HIE’s mismanagement – has almost certainly contributed to the problem.



The path just before you reach the Sheiling Rope Tow control hut. This is opposite where the bank was torn down without any planning consent [and Natural Retreats had to return some funds to HIE because theyâ??d done unlawful work there]. Photo Credit Alan Bratney.

Below the shieling rope tow you can see how the altered hydrology has led to water flowing across the path and creating a watercourse down it. This path leads down into the proposed beginners ski area. Its not difficult to envisage therefore how water pouring down the shieling may then enter the newly engineered ski area and cause erosion there. That could then create holes which HIE then needs to fill up with artificial snow, negating the whole justification for the development!

Prevention of ground damage at Cairn Gorm

The Planning Application includes a very interesting document entitled â??Working with the Environmentâ?• at Cairn Gorm. While dated February 2018 it was NOT included in the Ptarmigan Application ([see here](#)) which was approved by the CNPA earlier this summer and nor does HIE appeared to have taken any account of it when launching their ATV tourism initiative at Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)).

The document completely contradicts the claim made by HIE in the Ptarmigan Planning Application that it would be better to bring in materials by the vehicle than by helicopter:

5. Use of helicopters to airlift materials is encouraged. However, with the benefits of speed, reduced labour costs and avoidance of the need for heavy vehicles and thus tracking damage, it is subject to acceptable weather conditions. The type of light helicopter generally available is limited to loads of up to 1000kg. Helicopter carrying flight paths should avoid passing over staff or members of the public on the ground. As with all other works, proposed airlifts should seek to eliminate potential disturbance to wildlife (in particular during the nesting season) and the enjoyment of mountain users.

It also requires that even the access track to the Ptarmigan, which is now to be used for ATV tourism, should be tightly controlled:

8. Vehicle passage should be minimised and limited to hard tracks, with the exception of the track from Coire Cas car park to the Ptarmigan Top Station may be used for access to compliance with the CML hill track access policy. All vehicle movements on hill tracks and using the hill road need to be approved by CML and logged.

Following my post on ATV tourism at Cairn Gorm (see link above) and how this would contravene the Section 50 Agreement, the Cairngorms National Park Authority has confirmed to me that vehicles conveying tourists will be confined to the Ptarmigan track and will be strictly limited (the suggestion is one a month). It will be interesting to see how many are logged!

Having ignored this document for the last 18 months, it is deeply cynical of HIE to produce it as evidence in support of the current planning application and that they are capable of taking proper care of the natural environment at Cairn Gorm. The CNPA should not decide the Planning Application on the basis of documents which are frequently ignored but by a detailed examination of what is happening on the ground.

The document does however provide a useful summary of early damage done by the construction of downhill skiing at Cairn Gorm and the work that was then done to learn from past mistakes:

3. Operations within the Ski Area

Due to the relatively high altitude, exposure to extremes of weather, short growing season, thin and poor soils etc., vegetation and soils at Cairngorm are significantly more sensitive to damage and disturbance than at lower elevations, with slower recovery times. For these reasons, special principles and practices are needed to mitigate damage during construction and management operations on the Estate and in the ski area.

During the 1970s and early 1980s there was considerable public concern at the extent of damaged ground within the Estate, mostly in the ski area. Most of the damage emanated from the original construction in the 1960s and from long-term trampling damage by walkers. The operators of Cairngorm undertook reseeded work with varying degrees of success from 1965 onwards. Extensive study was made of damaged ground by Dr Adam Watson, Dr Neil Bayfield et al from the early 1980s. More formal monitoring was made of damaged ground starting in 1989, led by Watson. This established a baseline, identified the main problem sites, recommended remedial action and started annual post-ski season inspections with agreed rectification measures. The effort culminated in a report⁴ to HIE by Watson in 1994. Subsequently, a programme of works was implemented by the operator from 1987. This was undertaken by hand sowing and fertilising, augmented from 1988 by a hydroseeder (mounted on a Unimog 4x4). Together with some natural recovery, this was broadly successful in stabilising and recovering the position.

The construction of the funicular required considerable effort on reinstatement of disturbed ground arising from work activities within the ski area and was covered in a detailed Implementation Plan approved by THC and SNH as one of the planning conditions.

The environmental crime and I would describe it as no less is that since the construction of the funicular, HIE has effectively abandoned all those standards. Why should anyone believe that they are now suddenly going to abide by them again? Before doing any new work, HIE needs to engage independent environmental experts to survey all the damage that has taken place over the last 15 years and come up with a comprehensive ground restoration plan. Only when that has been completed should the CNPA contemplate approving any new planning applications.

Responding to the Planning Application

If you are concerned about the likely environmental consequences of HIE's proposal to engineer a new beginners ski area or believe that this won't help skiing on the mountain, you can lodge an objection through the comment section on the Planning Application ([see here](#)).

The North East Mountain Trust has already done so ([see here](#)) and one of the excellent points they make is that HIE's proposal to complete the work before the end of the year is totally contrary to their 'Working with the Environment' documents. That says it all! The current deadline for comments is 2nd September.

Category

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