

The future of the funicular

Description

[A version of this post appeared as a letter in the Press and Journal on 14th September in response to a letter from Gordon Benton on 3rd September]

A number of people and interests are advocating expansion of the facilities on Cairn Gorm to include a hill station to solve ongoing financial problems. It would not.

The founding concept pursued by the then Highlands and Islands Development Board was that a trip up the funicular to near the Cairn Gorm summit would provide a "World Class Mountain Experience" that would thus attract summer visitors in numbers that would finance the operation. To anyone familiar with comparable experiences in the Alps or elsewhere, this was Hype! The predicted summer visitor numbers were widely questioned – including by staff at Highland and Islands Enterprise's own Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise who were simply told to be silent. The numbers did not materialise and losses soared. After eight years of good management by the operating company Cairngorm Mountain Ltd, £3.6m of working capital derived by sale of its building to HIDB had gone and it had accumulated an overdraft of £5.6m with the Bank of Scotland. Losses for 2001-2002 alone were estimated at £1.9m – this despite HIE reducing annual rental from over £500,000/year to £100,000 in an admission that the operation could not cover running costs! HIE rescued it from bankruptcy.

Its successor Natural Retreats fared no better and went into administration. HIE bought the company back from the administrator for £416k (twice what it sold it for to Natural Retreats) and Audit Scotland's analysis shows it spent £1,996,000 propping up the operation in the remaining four months of that financial year. There have been additional substantial losses covered by the taxpayer. The losses continue. Then there is the future minimum liability of £9.6m to repair the funicular.

The situation is sad for hardworking employees on Cairn Gorm but schools and hospitals are short of funding. Other communities in the Highlands and Islands need investment by HIE in more realistic development. The taxpayer cannot go on pouring millions of pounds down a bottomless financial pit on Cairn Gorm.

The stated options are to repair and run with continuing losses or to remove the funicular, with removal estimated at a monstrous bill of £30-£50m. Time for a reality check – as supplied by the Director of the USA's Rocky Mountain National Park visiting the site. "Would you have built this here?" "No!" he replied drawing on USA's long experience of managing national parks. "Why not?" "Because there is only one thing you know for sure about any piece of technology – it will go out of date. So we never put in anything that we would not take out. Looking at the mass of concrete etc here, you will never take this out." That changes the options.

Removing the buried parts of the funicular pillars, for example, might create as many environmental problems etc as it is likely to have caused.

Much of the drainage in mountains like Cairngorms is at depth in free flowing subterranean channels. Disturbing surface layers, as happened during the Shieling rope tow and track construction ([see here for example](#)), can loose fine particles which drain down into these channels and block them causing surface flows and further erosion. This used to happen in the upper areas of Coire Cas for example as was demonstrated by foreign expert Fritz Schwarzenbach years ago. The installation of the concrete foundations of the funicular may have altered these channels but is also likely to have been affected by any changes in flow. Removing them now may result in further unpredictable changes. Groundwater is a tricky subject at any time.

A lot of rock and soil was also moved from the mountain during construction â?? so where do you get replacement and how do you get it in position etc without doing more damage?



Remains of half removed tow support in Coire na Ciste, poorly restored. The pillar should have been term. Photo Credit Alan Bratney

The supports for the tows which were removed in Coire na Ciste were not removed completely, but rather cut off at ground level. Better executed, that might be a far more sensible option for addressing the problems caused by the funicular than either repairing it or removing it completely. The costs of

removing the funicular completely should not be used as a reason for further development on the mountain. This would only compound the problems of how to remove redundant infrastructure in future.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. HIE
3. natural retreats
4. restoration
5. Tourism

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