

Cairn Gorm: A Vision for the Future

Description

The Cairn Gorm ski area: Voluntary Organisations call for an open debate about the future

A group of voluntary organisations (The Cairngorms Campaign, Campaign for a Better Cairngorm, North East Mountain Trust, Ramblers Scotland and the Scottish Wild Land Group.) has produced a 'vision' for the future of the mountain (below). Key elements include the following:

- The promised masterplan is long overdue; the time for piecemeal decision making is over.
- Ski uplift should be streamlined and upgraded.
- The case for repairing the funicular is very weak; no more public money should be wasted.
- Only developments which are in keeping with a sensitive high mountain environment should be considered. Zip wires and mountain coasters have no place high in Scotland's finest mountain range when they could be sited elsewhere.
- A Centre for the Mountain Environment could provide a sustainable visitor attraction.

An environmentally and economically sustainable future for the ski area will only become a reality if Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and the Scottish Government listen carefully to all of those concerned about the future of the Mountain. A proper public consultation on the long promised masterplan is the place for a full and open debate. The options for the future of the funicular must be part of that consultation, otherwise it will be rendered meaningless. With this in mind, the five voluntary organisations call on HIE and Fergus Ewing, the Cabinet Secretary responsible, to postpone a decision regarding the future of the funicular until after the consultation on the masterplan.

The Future of Cairn Gorm

This paper presents a vision for the future of Cairn Gorm in the context of its wider surroundings. It is endorsed by the voluntary organisations listed below.

Executive summary

1. Economic problems, outdated uplift and a lack of clear direction mean that Cairn Gorm is at a crossroads. There is increasing public concern that decisions are being taken without proper consultation with local people or with visitors to the mountain.
2. No decisions should be taken about the future of the existing infrastructure or potential new developments until a masterplan has been published and subjected to public consultation.

3. The skiing infrastructure should be modernised while accounting for climate change.
4. There is no case to repair the funicular which is not meeting the needs of skiers and will consume very large sums of money which would be better invested elsewhere on Speyside.
5. The development of an environmental centre would provide a year round educational experience which would appeal to a wide range of visitors.

Background

All parties, including statutory agencies, local people and businesses and voluntary organisations are struggling to envisage a future for the north side of Cairn Gorm. This problem has emerged because of the changing interests of visitors, the effects of climate change and problems with the funicular. There is growing concern that decisions are being taken before the production of a masterplan.

This paper lays out a vision for the north side of Cairn Gorm, which is environmentally sustainable, and which builds on its unique assets. It has been developed by the voluntary organisations listed below, who want to ensure that people can enjoy the mountain and that its unique qualities are protected.

Principles

1. Cairn Gorm should be considered in the context of both Glenmore and the whole Speyside corridor.
2. Activities on the mountain should reflect only what the unique environment of the mountain can offer. Activities which can be sited elsewhere should not be supported as detrimental ecological and visual impacts must be kept to a minimum.
3. No Government-funded developments should duplicate, or be in competition with, facilities provided elsewhere on Speyside.
4. The designated areas must continue to be protected.
5. Any new infrastructure must be constructed to the highest environmental standards.

The Context

What attracts people to the mountain?

The north side of Cairn Gorm is unique as the road allows people to access a high mountain environment easily. People visit Cairn Gorm for a wide variety of reasons, such as hill walking, climbing, downhill skiing, ski mountaineering and nature pursuits. Many, who do not normally venture far into the hills, go simply to enjoy the view and experience the splendour of the environment.

These visits to Cairn Gorm may well be combined with other outdoor activities in Glenmore and elsewhere both in summer and winter. These include mountain biking, walking at lower levels, clay pigeon shooting and Landmark.

A changing world

Firstly, it is not possible to predict with any certainty the effects of climate change on skiable snow, but the most likely scenario is that there will be fewer skiing days due to less settled weather and a higher snow line. Design of future infrastructure needs to take account of this variability in snow conditions.

Secondly, the popularity of the Glenmore corridor continues to increase. It is the gateway to the mountain but it is a very popular destination in its own right with cycling, water sports and walks in the forest. Visiting the mountain is not the sole attraction.

Proposals for the Future

Gateway

The gateway will remain Aviemore and Glenmore, with a clear focus on working with nature, not against it. Branding and local marketing should be aligned with this 'working with nature' message. The gateway effect could be amplified by the visible promotion of places such as RSPB Abernethy, Highlands Wildlife Park and other attractions in the Spey valley. Improved bus services linking these and the Glenmore / mountain area to Aviemore would reduce the parking problems around Glenmore and support carbon reduction. The number of people enjoying the area is likely to increase following the completion of the A9 dualling project. Improved local transport links, along with investment throughout Speyside, will help to spread the economic benefit throughout the area.

Skiing

Downhill skiing should be developed on 'a light and lean' basis and may well be confined to Coire Cas. Modern uplift will make the experience more attractive and this, along with a focus on improved facilities for beginners, should attract skiers back to the mountain. Lifts should end below the top of the plateau where frequent high winds make skiing unpleasant. A more compact ski area would allow snow making to be used to best advantage. Native trees should be planted widely to enhance the environment, reduce the visual impact and improve the skier experience, particularly in low cloud. Tree planting should be aligned with Cairngorm Connect.

As climate change is likely to make skiing conditions increasingly unpredictable, more bad weather alternatives should be developed in Speyside.

Centre for the Mountain Environment

Cairn Gorm and the surrounding area offer outstanding views of high plateau, steep rocky cliffs and deeply incised corries, which impress everybody. A Centre for the Mountain Environment would build on this high educational value and be in keeping with both the environment and what attracts people to the mountain.

The Centre could be a single location in the Day Lodge area or a twin-hub with one facility in the Day Lodge area, focussing on the arctic plateau, and another in the Loch Morlich area, focussing on the Caledonian forest. It could work closely with local wildlife tourism businesses, offering photography, wildlife, geology, walks etc. An enhanced ranger service would cater for a wide spectrum of interests. Activities would be provided for families along with information and pursuits for those who want to learn more about the mountain environment, including trips to field areas, such as the high plateau, either guided or informal. In addition, the Centre could house research facilities, with links to academic institutions elsewhere. Such a project is likely to attract large numbers of visitors and could contribute significantly to the local economy. It would provide an experience in sustainable mountain tourism unique in Britain.

In designing the project, much could be learned from the very successful Eden project in Cornwall.

Removal of funicular railway

The case for repairing the funicular is weak. The consultants' report, commissioned by HIE, envisages a much reduced role for this uplift facility. Repair will be very expensive and costs for long term maintenance will continue. It is no justification to base the case for repair on the argument that this would be a little less costly than removal. Removal of the concrete bases below ground level may not be needed, and work could be phased over a number of years, which cannot happen with the repair option. Phasing would reduce immediate demands on public funding and allow local contractors to be used throughout. Money saved could be invested elsewhere on Speyside, particularly at both ends of the corridor (Grantown and Newtonmore/Kingussie) which would benefit from increased visitor numbers, taking some of the pressure off Glenmore. The future of the Ptarmigan should be considered in the light of plans to modernise the ski uplift.

Developments including dedicated mountain biking tracks and rides (e.g. mountain coaster; zip wire etc).

Given Principle 2 above ('activities on the mountain should only reflect what the unique environment of the mountain can offer'), such facilities should be sited elsewhere on Speyside, if there is a demand for these developments. In addition, locating new facilities at lower levels reduces the problems of closure due to bad weather high on the mountain.

Cairngorms Campaign

Campaign for a Better Cairngorm

North East Mountain Trust

Ramblers Scotland

Scottish Wild Land Group

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Author

georgeallan

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