

The funicular closed system – some consequences of removing it

Description

Ray Sefton asserts, in a comment on my post on the reason for the disaster at Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)), that opposition by environmental groups caused highly damaging conditions to be inserted in the Visitor Management Plan for Cairn Gorm post the construction of the funicular railway. In particular, he asserts the imposition of a closed system at the top station preventing passengers having free access onto the mountain caused its economic failure.

What was being sold to summer visitors was a “mountain experience” of world class, which it wasn't. HIE forecast of annual summer visitor numbers was 165,000 but in the few years leading up to 2014, as an example, the reality averaged 92,903 – a shortfall of 72,097 (43.69 %). To provide an economic return to a company that was losing close on up to £2 million a year, would require an increase in visitor number of that order and probably more. When opening the closed system was discussed with the chairlift company at meetings I attended, the manager Bob Kinnaird stated that they did not receive much demand for open access. The impression was given that Ray Sefton's campaign for it was, at best, rather a distraction and at worst a bit of an embarrassment. The idea that providing an open system would enhance the mountain experience to the extent that visitor number would rise to the point of ensuring the operation's financial viability is a fantasy!

A key argument against opening the system is never discussed but I encountered it one June when heading south through the Lairig Ghru. Seated by the side of the path were three rather unhappy looking young guys.

“Are you alright” I asked?

“No!”

“What's up?”

They had just discovered the rotting corpse of a young guy up in the Garbh Coire of Braeriach. That Easter, he had gone up from the top station area onto the summit of Cairn Gorm with his girlfriend on a quick visit. The mist came down, as it often does up there. They set out to return but got separated in the mist. She got it right. He didn't and wandered far to a slow death.

Anyone training people to move safely in an environment like the high Cairngorms has to move them along that educational gradient from awareness to insight to competence. Most, probably the great majority of those using the chairlift to access the high Cairngorms were hillwalkers etc well along that gradient. Not so the kind of highly urbanised clientele the funicular was focused on attracting. Anyone who has trained folk of that ilk in moving in an outdoor environment, as I have, is often taken aback at their sheer lack of any sense of direction or capacity for directed movement. As the sad situation on Braeriach that June day demonstrated, providing open easy access directly onto such an environment for tens of thousands of people would have been an act of near criminal irresponsibility.

[Ed. Parkswatch understands one of the questions that Highlands and Island Enterprise has explicitly asked Jura Consulting, whom they have appointed to develop a new masterplan at Cairn Gorm, to consult on is whether the funicular closed system should be opened in summer.]

Category

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