

The Cairngorms National Park wildlife sink hole

Description

The Cairngorms National Park Authority may have acted promptly against its vice-convenor, Gena Blackett, last week for something she said ([see here](#)), but when it comes to meaningful actions on conservation, it is not fit for purpose. This post takes a look at the CNPA's multiple failures when it comes to protecting wildlife as revealed since lockdown.

The poisoned sea-eagle

On 27th July Police Scotland issued a news release about a sea-eagle found poisoned earlier this year on a grouse moor on Donside. This is a notorious area for raptor persecution, in what should be known as the dark side of the Cairngorms National Park. There has been excellent coverage on Raptor Persecution Scotland ([see here](#) – list of posts at end), including an expose of the response from the Scottish Government ([see here](#)). Raptor Persecution Scotland also rightly condemned the CNPA for their silence ([see here](#)). One tweet from their Chief Executive, that was it. Quite a contrast to their proactive response to what Cllr Geva Blackett said on social media.

Disappearing hen harriers

In June Wildland Ltd, who manage a number of estates owned by Danish billionaire Anders Povslen, issued an unprecedented and beautifully produced blog about what had happened to three young hen harriers that had hatched and been tagged on their land in the western Cairngorms ([see here](#)). One died, apparently of natural causes, but two disappeared in mysterious circumstances. One was last recorded over the Invercauld Estate, on Deeside, and one near Dalnaspidal, on the western boundary of the National Park. [Update 13th August] I have subsequently been informed via an intermediary that in the view of the Invercauld Estate the hen harrier disappeared over Dinnet and they wanted the information in this post to be corrected. They have not contacted me directly and it's very difficult to tell from the map where the harrier disappeared – it was close to the border between the estates – but I have passed Invercauld's concerns on to Wild Land Ltd]. What was unprecedented was a private estate making public evidence that implicitly indicts other landowners for their persecution of wildlife. The frustration of trying to help the hen harrier only to see them disappear must be enormous.

Invercauld has a dubious record when it comes to wildlife persecution ([see here](#)). It forms part of the CNPA's East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership (ECMP) which has four objectives, one of which is “*Raptor and other priority species conservation*”. The disappearance of the hen harrier over the estate should, therefore, have caused public embarrassment for the CNPA, particularly since almost all the neighbouring land forms part of the ECMP. However, unlike in 2016, when the CNPA publicly condemned the illegal trapping of the gull, silence.

Then, on 25th June, it was announced that two more satellite tagged harriers had disappeared in the National Park in early April, just after lockdown commenced ([see here](#)). One was on a grouse moor near Newtonmore, the other on a grouse moor on Donside. Only when asked did the CNPA Chief

Executive, Grant Moir, issue a short response ([see here](#)). This effectively said that while raptor persecution was unacceptable, the CNPA was powerless to do anything .

The CNPA's failed plan to protect raptors

That claim was a half-truth. One of the objectives of the current National Park Partnership Plan, the document which is meant to determine everything the CNPA does, is to ELIMINATE raptor persecution.

The June meeting of the CNPA Board was presented with a report on progress to date which included the following:

3e.	Eliminating the illegal killing of raptors through increased wildlife crime enforcement capacity and recognition for good management	Appointment of and assistance to special constables Raptor tracker project	Raptor persecution eliminated/ negligible in CNP	Special constables appointed – March 2018. Review March 2019 Wildlife crime raptor tracker developed and	Raptor tracker to be deployed on 3 or 4 GE chicks in June	Sp co vis use wil Sol tes
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As predicted back in 2017 ([see here](#)), the special constable scheme has been a total flop and this has now been confirmed by the CNPA: *“Really useful for visitor management but less useful for a tool to combat wildlife crime”*. As for the plan to tag 3-4 golden eagle chicks in June, that is pathetic. We know that golden eagles disappear over grouse moors and it is grouse moors that need to be tackled. The indicator for eliminating raptor persecution should clearly have been graded red, not amber.

That the indicator for golden eagles was rated green is even more extraordinary:

No	Agenda for Action	Key Work Areas	5 year Outcome	Milestones & End Date	Notes 18/19	N
				tested in 2019		Lik 20
3f.	Developing a multi partner golden eagle project which includes further analysis on occupancy following the 2016 national survey, informs management and develops the wildlife tourism opportunities associated with golden eagles	Mapping of 'vacant' GE (and other raptor) territories in CNP. Examination of options re raptor trail, eagle watch in Ballater etc	Estates accepting of GE (and other raptor) territory map and signed up to assisting with re-colonisation. Raptor watch project up and running	2019 - Raptor mapping (current sites and vacant territories) started with raptor groups and estates Ballater ECMP interpretation installed	Meetings with 2 of 3 raptor groups held. Maps to be developed during 2019	EC co are pr W be rep

It is just as well the rarer sea-eagle was never included in the plan! The mapping of vacant golden eagle territories will do nothing to bring them back. It may help illustrate areas from which they are missing but that the CNPA has had to get estates in the ECMP, which include Balmoral and Prince Charles' estate of Delnadamph, to agree to what territories are delineated on maps tells you everything. This is an exercise based not on science but on what landowners judge to be acceptable. Eagle territories are not fixed but depend on food supply. The more food, like red grouse and mountain hare, the smaller the area of land golden eagles need. These territories will have been fixed on assumptions about hare culling (see below) and how much predation of grouse is acceptable to large landowners, including the Royal Family.

That the National Trust for Scotland at Mar Lodge – whose hen harrier chicks also go missing as soon as they fly east – remains part of the ECMP, suggests that they too, like the CNPA, remains under the control of the big landowners.

Beavers

In May, the Ferret broke the news that Scottish Natural Heritage, the agency with lead responsibility for protected wildlife in Scotland, had granted a large number of licenses to landowners to kill beavers on Tayside ([see here](#)). The Ferret subsequently confirmed that 87 beavers, almost a quarter of the Scottish population, had been killed between 1st May 2019, when they were given legal protection, and the end of the year ([see here](#)). This week SNH issued a blog claiming that they are now working “in partnership” on beavers ([see here](#)).

Strangely, SNH made no mention of the Cairngorms National Park Authority in that blog. Back in 2016, the CNPA Chief Executive Grant Moir announced they were actively looking to re-introduce beavers to the National Park ([see here](#)). Indeed, as I pointed out then, the CNPA had in 2013 identified two areas, the Insh Marshes and the Dinnet National Nature Reserve as being eminently suitable for beaver re-introduction. Dinnet NNR is managed by SNH so, one might have thought they would have tried to transfer some beavers there before agreeing to a single one being shot.

However, I have discovered there is not a single mention of beavers in the Dinnet NNR management plan agreed in 2014 ([see here](#)). If you want to understand why, here’s a likely clue:

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Property Management

Muir of Dinnet NNR is owned by Dinnet and Kinord Estates and managed through a Nature reserve Agreement. A new 25 year agreement between us and SNH was finalised in 2006. The agreement includes a change of boundary which now excludes land managed for agricultural or domestic use. Consequently, the reserve has been reduced in size to 1163 ha, but 90% of the land within the reserve is now managed primarily for nature conservation. To celebrate the completion of the agreement, The Duke of Rothesay visited Muir of Dinnet NNR on 20th April 2006, a fitting tribute, following his visit to the original Muir of Dinnet NNR, 29 years previously.

There are 4 buildings within the reserve boundary, 3 of which are not connected with the management of the reserve. Two of these are cottages which the Estate let as holiday homes and one is the old chapel at Meikle Kinord. The other building is the Burn o' Vat visitor centre, for which we have a separate lease with the Estate and are responsible for its maintenance. We are also responsible for the maintenance of paths and jointly responsible for the maintenance of vehicular tracks. This work is either carried out by our staff or contracted out as necessary.



Duke of Rothesay at the re-opening of
NNR

Extract from “The Muir of Dinnet National Nature Reserve”

The Dinnet Estate, which also appears responsible for lots of unlawful bulldozed tracks on Morven just to the west of the NNR ([see here](#)), is owned by Marcus Humphrey who used to be on the Board of the CNPA. All credit to CNPA staff back in 2013 for identifying it as a good site for beaver re-introduction. The scandal is that SNH did not follow this through in their management agreement with the estate.

The report to the CNPA Board in June included an update on beaver re-introduction work:

Ig.	Plan proactively for the potential and management implications of beaver populations	Stakeholder engagement Habitat preparation Scenario planning	Programme of habitat management in place Stakeholders well informed and prepared	Scenario planning & options appraisal summer 2018 Habitat management projects started 2019	CN Beaver sub-group established, watching brief on SG position Aspen & riparian planting projects underway	Pr Be Ju A in E lik m
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What is particularly interesting is the last column which states “*expert opinion predicts likelihood of arrival by natural means remains low*”. That is presumably because beavers are unlikely to cross unwooded watersheds, such as those between the Tay and the Spey or the Tay and the Dee. The implication is that translocation – re-introduction to new areas – is the main option for helping beavers expand their range especially if they are shot as soon as they move into farmland. Despite NO progress having been made for seven years, the work has been classified as green.

While SNH was busy issuing licenses to kill beavers last year, the CNPA appears to have remained silent instead of offering those beavers a home. The give-away is the “*watching brief on SG (Scottish Government) position*”. The CNPA is not prepared to take any meaningful action to protect wildlife without the agreement of the Scottish Government.

Mountain Hares

In June the Scottish Greens ambushed the Scottish Government with an amendment at the final stage of the Wildlife Bill. This proposed year round protection for mountain hares backed by a petition that gained 22,000 signatures in a few days. Faced with enormous public pressure, the Scottish Government decided to support the amendment which it could have included in the Bill from the start. It however rejected a further amendment from the Green MSP Mark Ruskell to give more protection to beavers.

Had the Scottish Government been able to control the process as it normally does, it is probable that this additional protection for mountain hares would have never reached the statute book. Organisations representing landowning and shooting interests were outraged. It is worth reading their subsequent letter to Scottish Ministers ([see here](#)) to understand just how opposed they are to any legislative controls, however weak. As we know from the licensed beaver cull, giving mammals year round protection is completely meaningless when SNH issues licenses to all who request them.

The Scottish Government, however, has been reluctant to implement even this very modest measure. It has failed to enact the revised legislation prior to this year’s killing season, which began on 1st August, and instead called on “voluntary restraint”. The Cairngorms National Park Authority has meantime maintained a total silence.

The explanation is that it has been complicit in the slaughter of mountain hares – prime food for eagles – in the National Park. Indeed it has actively worked with landowners to allow hare culls to continue, as can be seen in the report to the last Board Meeting (columns 4 and 5):

3c.	Implementing guidance and trialling new approaches emerging from national initiatives.	Map impact of implementation of revised muirburn code.	ECMP outcomes: #Combined delivery of private and public	Wader nesting productivity project with BTO (phase 1	Wader productivity project undertaken in 2018 & 2019.	W co
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No	Agenda for Action	Key Work Areas	5 year Outcome	Milestones & End Date	Notes 18/19	
	for example: mapping what implementation of the revised muirburn code means, using the Principles of Moorland Management and using the lessons of the Understanding Predation project to share knowledge and data	opportunities for woodland/scrub expansion. Initiate/implement species monitoring and management planning	interest outcomes; # Greater habitat diversity, including expansion of woodland and scrub in key locations; # Retained sense of wildness and landscape value; # Diverse wildlife populations appropriate to the landscape and habitats; # Improved understanding of moorland habitat and species management; # Collaboration and communication based on a set of agreed principles.	complete and published – Jan 2019. Development of mountain hare management plans – 2019. Species monitoring established and data collection initiated – 2019. Spatial mapping of muirburn plans, woodland/scrub expansion - 2019	Mountain hare management protocols being field tested. Species monitoring and data collation established. Raptor surveys carried out in 2019. Muirburn plan maps completed Dec 2019. Muirburn discussion event took place in March 2019.	

The CNPA has, like the Scottish Government, worked on the basis that mountain hares need to be “managed”, not protected, hence the development of “mountain hare management plans”. The CNPA have declined my requests to make public exactly what work they have been doing or agreed with estates in the ECMP on mountain hares.

Now that mountain hares will become fully protected, this plan is in tatters and the CNPA Board need to consider and agree a completely different approach to mountain hares in the National Park. It looks fairly certain that if they consulted the public on this, the vast majority of people would say that NO licenses should be issued for hare culling in the National Park.

Protection of other wildlife

At present, only a few of the species that are being persecuted in our National Parks receive any publicity and, of those that do, the public is told only a small part of the story. Most raptors, for

example, are not tagged and the numbers disappearing in the Cairngorms National Park is therefore likely to be several times what is reported to the police.

Meantime the Cairngorms National Park allows hundreds, possibly thousands, of crows, weasels and stoats to be trapped each year over much of its area. Foxes are shot. Questions about the degree of illegal persecution of other predators, such as pine marten and wildcat, are never asked. We do know however that with SNH having declared the wildcat extinct, gamekeepers have effectively been given a license to shoot any cat they see. The National Park, instead of protecting wildlife as intended, is a wildlife disaster zone.

It appears likely that this ruthless run of the mill persecution will have got a lot worse under lockdown. With the CNPA instructing all its field staff to remain at home and issuing messages to the public not to stray far from home, those who wanted to persecute wildlife were given a free rein to do so. With landowners also likely to try and kill as many mountain hares as possible while it is still legal to do so without a license, 2020 might well go down as the worst year for wildlife slaughter in the Cairngorms since the 19th Century.

Unfortunately, rather than being honest about what is really going on, the CNPA continues to pretend all is well in the National Park:

“The Cairngorms Nature BIG 10 Days at Home, a virtual version of the BIG weekend normally held each year in May, was a huge success with over 80 on-line events. Rangers, land managers, NGOs and communities all contributed material to bring the outstanding nature of the Cairngorms into people’s living rooms during lockdown”. (Extract from the CEO’s Report to the June Board Meeting)

The failure of the Cairngorms National Park – what needs to happen

The Cairngorms National Park should be the richest area for wildlife in Scotland but has so far failed to reach anything like its potential. What successes there have been since it was created, such as the natural woodland regeneration in the Cairngorms Connect area, owe almost nothing to the National Park Authority. Rather they are the responsibility of a few enlightened conservation landowners, led by Wild Land Ltd which has paved the way for various conservation organisations to follow. The main reason for the CNPA’s failure is it has failed to tackle the unsporting estates, whose only interest is in managing their land for deer stalking or as grouse moors. Neither land-use is compatible with conservation, the single most important statutory purpose of the National Park.

The CNPA’s continued failure to achieve conservation objectives is not a coincidence. The tentacles of landowners and landowning interests stretch deep into the Scottish Government, which maintains increasingly centralised control over both our National Parks and Scottish Natural Heritage, and into the National Park Board. I mentioned Marcus Humphrey earlier, but Doug McAdam, former Director of Scottish Land and Estates, now sits on the CNPA Board as an appointee of the Scottish Government and there are other links.

For example, the Hon. Geva Charlotte Caroline Winn was, according to the Peerage ([see here](#)) born on 15 September 1955 and in 1987 married Simon John Blackett, factor at Invercauld. How Geva Blackett has used her experience at Invercauld to influence the CNPA and SNP hierarchy, seems to me a matter of much greater public interest than what she may have said about a Tory Councillor and

former colleague in the heat of the moment. With people like this on the Board it is difficult if not impossible for frontline staff at the CNPA, many of whom really do care about wildlife, to take any meaningful action. There are no radical conservationists on the Board to defend them.

Free of landowner and Scottish Government control, the CNPA could make a real difference. Speaking out for wildlife, exposing what is going wrong and making the case that our National Parks should be different would be a start. But the biggest difference the CNPA could make would be to use its byelaw making powers to ban driven grouse shooting in the National Park and alongside that end damaging practices such as muirburn and the administration of medicated grit to red grouse. Waiting for the endless talk of licensing regimes to reach a conclusion – the Scottish Government has still made no response to the Werritty Review ([see here](#)) – simply perpetuates the problems and the wildlife slaughter.

The one positive to come out of the sea-eagle poisoning – not the first case of white-tailed eagle persecution in the Cairngorms – is the increasing public outrage at the wildlife slaughter in our National Parks. If more people can start to make the links – as I have tried to do in this post – between all the various examples of wildlife failure and the reasons they are happening, there might at last be an opportunity for real reform and meaningful actions to protect wildlife.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. landed estates
4. Scottish Government
5. wildlife persecution

Date Created

August 6, 2020

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