

Cairngorms' Planners recommend destruction of ancient woodland at Nethy Bridge

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Plant strife

Two cheers for the conservation project to protect threatened plants in wildflower meadows and pinewoods that are “threatened by habitat loss and climate change” in the Cairngorms National Park (CNP) (Scotsman, 18 August).

While this project, led by Plantlife Scotland is, of course, greatly welcomed, it comes against a background of the CNP planners allowing the destruction of such wildflower meadows and pinewoods by allocating them for housing development in its Local Development Plan and granting subsequent planning consent.

For example, two spectacular wildflower meadows near Carrbridge have in recent years been lost to housing development despite numerous objections. One has already been built upon while the other, which was graced by gentians, frog orchids,

and numerous waxcap species including the Blushing and the Crimson Waxcap has now been ploughed (which destroys much of such plant life) and awaits final destruction by housing development.

Elsewhere, near Nethy Bridge, an ancient pinewood, School Wood (owned by Tulloch Homes), is currently threatened with an application for 20 houses within it. Plantlife Scotland, in its objection to this application states that this development would “result in the loss of threatened habitats” including habitats and species that are “priorities listed in the Scottish Biodiversity List”. Plantlife Scotland reminds the CNP authority that “planning authorities [...] have a duty to further the conservation of biodiversity” and “Granting permission for this development would constitute a failure of this duty”.

Numerous questions arise from this intolerable situation, where the reality of development pressure in the CNP appears so markedly at odds with its public face.

How is it that large building companies appear able to ride roughshod over the statutory aims of the national park?

And concerning the still to be decided Nethy Bridge application, will the CNP now grant planning permission for a development that flies in the face of its partnership with Plantlife Scotland to “restore and protect some of the rare plants and fungi of our pine-woods”?

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See <https://www.scotsman.com/news/environment/project-help-save-cairngorms-natural-beauty-2945100> for Scotsman article

In the same week that Plantlife Scotland, with the support of the Cairngorms National Park Authority, launched this new scheme that hopes to “*restore and protect some of the rare plants and fungi of our pinewoods, meadows and mountains*” and, on the same day my letter appeared in the Scotsman, CNPA’s planners published their report ([see here](#)) into the application for 20 new houses in School Wood ([see here for analysis on parkswatch in April](#)).

The Planners’ Report acknowledges that,

- *“The CNPA Ecology Officer advises that the site comprises a semi-natural woodland habitat of high ecological value and the features present within the site indicate that the woodland is a rich and complex resource.”*



Rare pinewood mason bee *Osmia uncinata* emerging from a nesthole in a Scots pine snag on the threatened site. The removal of large pine trees including dead ones destroys potential nesting habitat of this caledonian pinewood specialist. Photo credit Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group

- *“CNPA Landscape Officer considers that the proposal will result in a significant change to the landscape character of the site. This will be an adverse effect ...”.*

- *“It is widely accepted that the loss of ancient woodland is considered irreplaceable and therefore compensation for loss of this resource is not possible.”*

It is also, of course, the case that Scottish Planning Policy 2014 states:

216. *Ancient semi-natural woodland is an irreplaceable resource and [...] should be protected from adverse impacts resulting from development.*

And, the Cairngorms National Park Forest Strategy, 2018 states:

“The woodlands of the Cairngorms are of national and international importance because they contain the largest remaining areas of semi-natural woodland habitats in Britain!” and the Strategy undertakes to *“Continue to protect ancient and semi-natural woodlands from further damage and fragmentation.”*



Spotted flycatcher, on the red list (most endangered) of birds declining in the British Isles in School V June 2020. Photos credit Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group.

So, surely the answer to the question posed in my Scotsman letter, “*will the CNP now grant planning permission*” for the 20 houses in School Wood should be a resounding “**No**”!

How could any national park worthy of the name even consider turning part of an ancient pinewood of high ecological value into a housing estate!

But the CNPA planners have resorted to a ruse that they first tried earlier this year for a nearby woodland (by Lettoch Road). CNPA planners argue that, if granted planning permission, the applicant would undertake to manage the remaining woodland better, so that (they claim) there would be an overall conservation gain that could not otherwise be achieved!

Whilst that claim is already extremely dubious in itself, it ignores two important points that are not considered at all in the Report.

Firstly, if planning consent is refused, the present landowner, Tulloch Homes, would have no further interest in the wood and would probably sell. No other property developer would be interested and thus the wood would likely end up with a new owner interested in sensitively managing the woodland. So, a much greater conservation gain would result.

Secondly, the CNPA planners’ ruse could **reward** any landowner who has allowed any damaging activity such as fly-tipping or serious overgrazing to occur. “Present us with a damaged/neglected/trashed bit of land”, say the CNPA planners, “and behold! we will grant your planning application if you promise to improve the bit left over from your building site!”

It is not difficult to see what the overall effect of such a misguided ruse would be, where landowners throughout the national park would know that neglecting and abusing their land would improve their chance of obtaining planning consent from the CNPA.

Fortunately, there is still hope. The CNPA Planning Committee will make the final decision on 28th August, and when this same ruse was suggested, at Lettoch Road, the Committee made the brave and very welcome decision to refuse planning consent. Moreover, when the applicant then appealed to Scottish Government Reporters, his appeal was **dismissed**.

So, if the Committee refuse consent in School Wood, it is likely that any appeal would also be unsuccessful, particularly as the new Local Development Plan, which would then be in force, is expected to have no allocation for housing in School Wood.

All members of the CNPA Board are on the Planning Committee so, if you live in the National Park, please let your directly elected local representatives and councillors who serve on the Board know your views. You can find their names (click on their names to email them) [here](#).

And for readers who don’t know the wood to get an idea of what’s at stake, here are a few more of the plants and animals that have been photographed there by the Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group.....



The part of the wood due to be felled provides a home to all sorts of creatures – note hedgehog in foreground. Photo credit BSCG.



Twinflower, just outside the area threatened by the housing development. This is one of the plants whose range the new Cairngorms plants project is trying to expand to expand.....but for this to happen, it needs somewhere to go. Photo credit BSCG.



Crested tit, Photo credit BSCG.



Melanostoma scalare female syrphidae Female Melanostoma scalare visiting serrated wintergreen, a threatened plant whose range needs to expand, in School Wood. Photo credit BSCG.



Photo credit BSCG.

Category

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1. CNPA
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