

Muirburn and environmental destruction in the Cairngorms â?? Glen Callater and the Invercauld Estate

Description



Muirburn on the east flank of Sron nan Gabhar

I had not been up Glen Callater for a number of years but last week, after a wet morning, went for a run over Creag nan Gabhar returning down the northern half of the glen. Credit should be given to Invercauld Estate for provision of the car park at Auchallater which is very well used



The view from just above the car park is misleading: a beautiful gorge, an area of mixed deciduous woodland and some natural regeneration on the strip of land between the Callater burn and a deer fence. It's an approximation of how one might expect the natural environment to appear in a National Park.



Looking across Callater Burn towards Creag na Leachda (on right). Note the two sheep, mops for ticks.

Beyond the gorge, the view changes drastically to a farmed landscape. Tree farming dominates the centre rear. The whole slope has had hundreds of divots excavated to create mounds for planting native trees behind a deer fence. And in the foreground grouse farming, characterised by the large patch of muirburn.



Just a couple of hundred metres further on, postage stamp tree enclosures ([see here](#)) have been created as part of an EU Life Project to help protect the freshwater pearl mussel by preventing silt being washed off into rivers. It should also incidentally improve the fishing, more farming to produce game species, as the trees drop leaves and invertebrates into the river providing more food.

While planting trees on river banks can help reduce flooding and erosion, creating postage stamp pockets while burning the ground beyond makes very little sense. In Glen Shee, there are places where the Invercauld Estate has burned the land right up to the postage stamp fences:



Clunie Water, Glen Shee, with muirburn right up the river bank and the tree enclosure

Added to which there are large numbers of sheep, more farming. Outside the plantations and post stamp fencing, almost nothing that grows has a chance. It's burned or chewed to bits. As a consequence of the burning and chewing wildlife, except the red grouse and a few other species which depend on heather, disappears. Apart from red grouse, a couple of raven were the only birds I saw.



View north from Sron Dubh (the plantation is just to the left of the picture)

Promoting unnaturally high numbers of red grouse helps pass on disease, hence dotted among the burned strips are mounds with medicated grit. More farming, but unlike agriculture unregulated.



View north west from Sron Dubh to the summit of Morrone

Almost everywhere you look, the land has been burned to bits.



View from Sron Dubh towards Sron nan Gabhar



View from Sron Dubh- Sron nan Gabhar section of ridge up Glen Callater

Until the middle distance, there is hardly an inch of land that has not been burned. The idea that planting some postage stamp bit of woodland alongside rivers might somehow compensate for this destruction is clearly nonsensical.



Meall an t-Slugain 849m from Creag nan Gabhar

The burning extends right to the very tops. Despite it being a well known fact that muirburn considerably increases the rate that water runs off the hill, four years after Ballater was almost destroyed by floods ([see here for video](#)), nothing appears to have changed.



View down to Loch Callater

The muirburn extends beyond the start of Loch Callater, by my reckoning over 6km in length and covering an area of over 12 square kilometres. A huge area of ground that could be used to create what are known as ecosystem benefits.



Burned heather and sphagnum

Instead the burning takes place without any consideration of what lies beneath.

The Invercauld Estate is a member of the East Cairngorms Moorlands Partnership, the means by which the Cairngorms National Park Authority is trying to improve moorland management. One of its aims is to try and work with estates to improve the way muirburn is carried out so that, for example, burning does not take place in areas of peat forming sphagnum mosses. The evidence from Glen Callater is that this voluntary approach is having very little effect.



The area of clean rock has been created by fire

While the destructive impact of muirburn on peat is well known, it also destroys other habitats.



Mosses and lichens on small area of unburned rock by the road up Glen Callater

Lichens that can take hundreds of years to cover a rock



Burned area just behind

are incinerated after the strike of a match.

While the CNPA exhorts visitors not to light fires almost everywhere in the National Park (contrary to the Scottish Outdoor Access Code) it allows landowners to burn vast areas of countryside. There is something wrong here and it has nothing to do with conservation, whether of nature or of "cultural landscapes". Muirburn is creating a new low in terms of how humans abuse the land and is being allowed to happen in the heart of the National Park.



Grouse butt on lower slopes Creag nan Gabhar looking north west

It is important to note, however, that no two estates practice intensive grouse moor management in exactly the same way, There are important variations. The grouse butts along Glen Callater are well hidden and easy enough to miss if you are walking along the road through the glen. There are also â?? as you can see from the photos â?? relatively few hill roads, with the main landscape atrocity being at the start of the road leading up onto Sron Dubh:

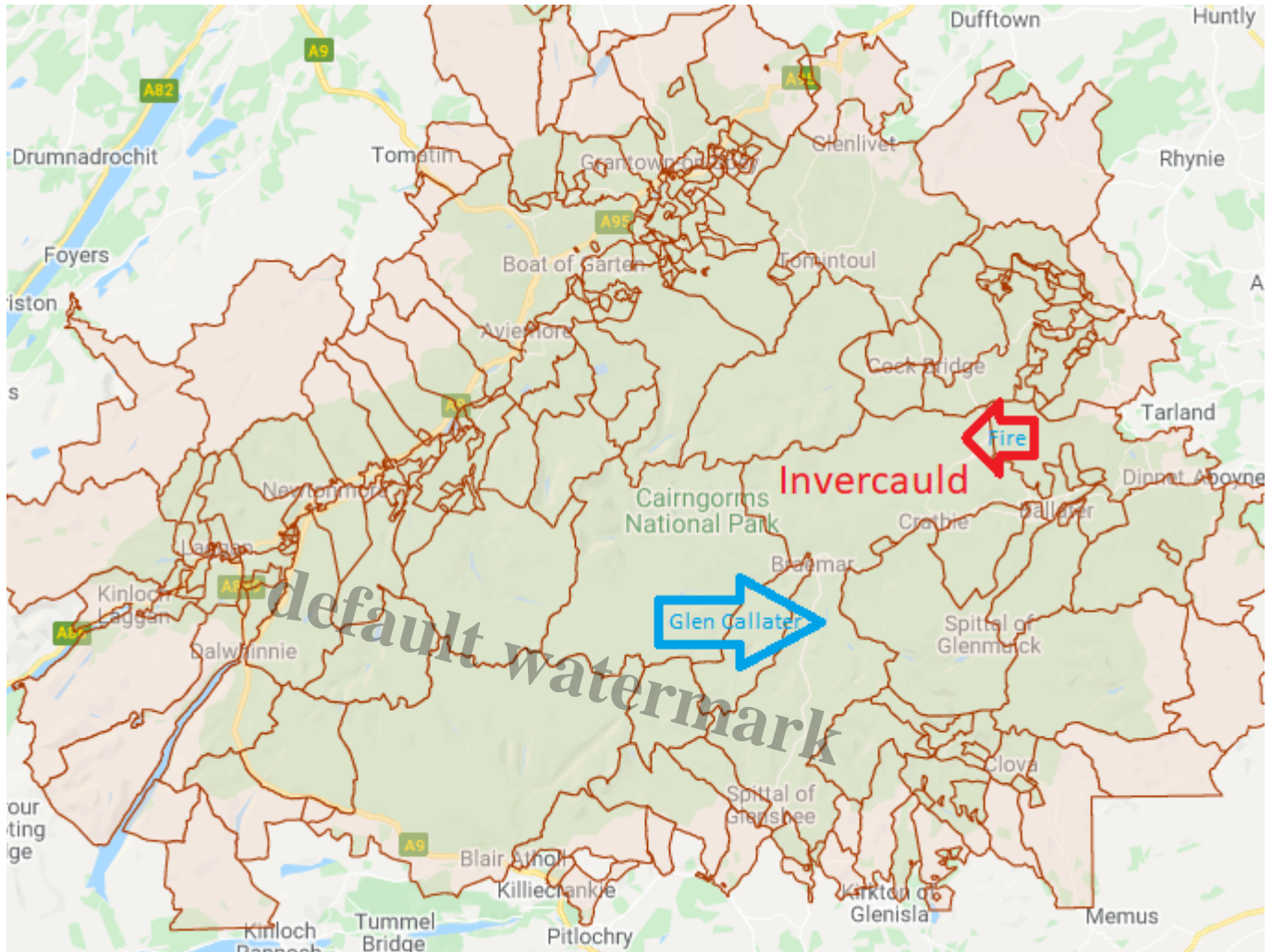


While Invercauld estate has been associated with a number of practices associated with intensive grouse moor management, including raptor persecution, the extent and intensity of the muirburn it practices is the most pressing issue.



Burn on Cnoc Chalmac, by the River Gairn, with Geallaig Hill behind viewed from Brown Cow Hill 15

Unfortunately, just two weeks after the temporary ban on muirburn introduced by the Coronavirus Act expired on 30th September, Invercauld was burning again.



Map credit CNPA estate maps.

Invercauld Estate, which is owned by a two trusts of the Farquharson family, is huge. It covers c44,000 hectares. Not all of what it does is bad and historically it has a long history of using its land to support outdoor recreation, from the Braemar Caravan Park to the Glen Shee ski slopes, and local communities. That is quite a contrast to many landowners in the Cairngorms. But its claim ([see here for estate management statement](#)) that its land management objectives are in accord with the objectives of the National Park is wrong unless those objectives have become totally debased.

If Invercauld was to end muirburn, that would make a significant contribution towards the Cairngorms National Park becoming a real National Park, with all the benefits that would bring, from carbon capture and flood prevention to the regeneration of the land and wildlife. If Invercauld is practising muirburn because the only way it can finance itself is by raising income from grouse shooting, then the answer is for it to open its books and join with the CNPA to call for new forms of state subsidy that would enable it to manage the land (and employ its workforce) to achieve conservation objectives. If, however, the trustees of Invercauld are burning the land for the god of grouse, they deserve no sympathy. In that case people need to start demanding that the land they manage as grouse moor is compulsorily purchased and handed over to the National Park Authority to manage in the public interest.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
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