

Invercauld and the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership – when partnership fails what next?

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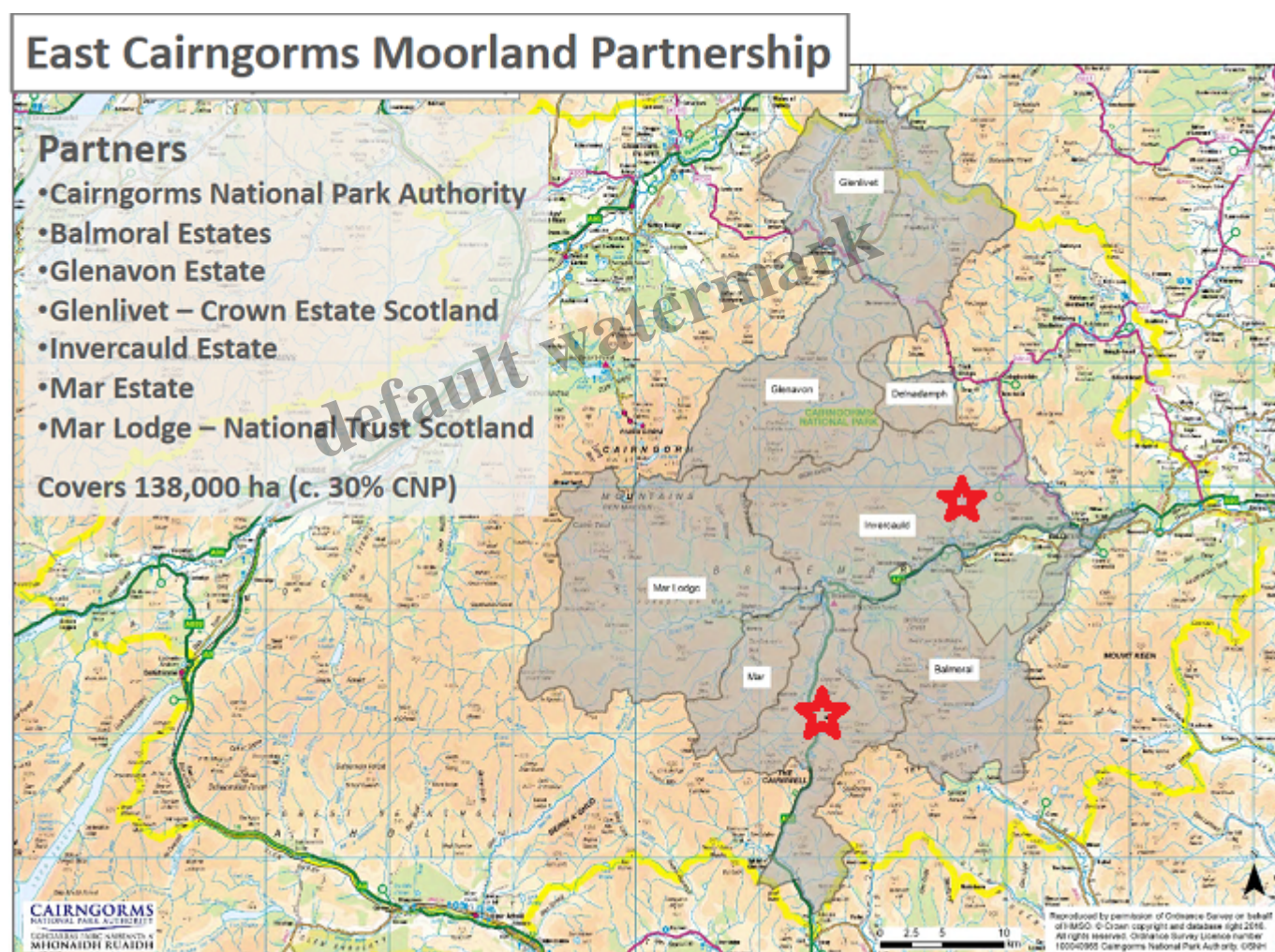


Aerial view of muirburn on part of Invercauld Estate south of Braemar. Photo courtesy of Google Maps.

Just over a month ago the Cairngorms National Park Authority announced ([see here](#)) that the

Invercauld Estate had left the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership “*following the discovery of a poisoned golden eagle on their land.*” This post takes a look at the implications for the Cairngorms National Park Authority and for land reform more generally.

The news release was unclear about whether Invercauld had decided to resign or whether it had been expelled from the ECMP. Unlike almost any other news release you will ever read, no-one was quoted, not even the Chief Executive of the CNPA. The unwritten rule of landownership is that whatever your neighbours get up to, thou shalt not criticise them in public. The owners of grouse moors have been so successful in influencing our Public Authorities that that rotten ethos is now embedded in how the CNPA works. There is no better demonstration of the hypocrisy and double standards than Prince Charles who, having spent much of the last year warning people about wildlife collapse around the world ([see here](#) for example), has been silent about wildlife crime on Balmoral’s doorstep.



Red stars indicate the enormous area covered by the Invercauld Estate, 43,600 ha or almost a third of the ECMP. Map credit CNPA Board Papers

https://cairngorms.co.uk/resource/docs/boardpapers/05022020/ECMP_CUAGFeb20-revised.pdf

The departure/expulsion of the Invercauld Estate has however created a gaping hole in the CNPA's stated strategy to deliver landscape scale conservation in the National Park. The ECMP has, since 2015, been the CNPA's main vehicle for trying to make grouse moor management in the National Park more “conservation friendly”. For example, without Invercauld, Balmoral is now isolated geographically

from the rest of the “partnership” so there can be no join up of conservation initiatives. Reason enough, one might think, for the CNPA to review its approach to partnership working as a matter of urgency.

Yet in the papers for the CNPA Board which met on Friday 4th June, I could find only two references to what had happened. The first was in the normally informative Chief Executive’s report ([see here](#)), but in the section reporting on “corporate communications” not conservation matters:

“These include our response to the golden eagle poisoning on Invercauld Estate –and the subsequent departure of Invercauld from the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership”

The second was in the Cairngorms Nature Action Plan mid-term report, but this did not even name Invercauld:

Home range occupation and breeding success of golden eagle, hen harrier and peregrine

17. While raptor populations are generally increasing in the west of the Park, ongoing persecution and habitat availability means that, in the east of the Park, territory occupancy of golden eagle, peregrine and hen harrier has not recovered from declines monitored in recent decades. This is despite constructive ongoing dialogue with several estates in the east of the Park and with the relevant raptor study groups.
18. Work in the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership has built a solid foundation for establishing trust and improving relationships between estates and raptor study groups, although the recent poisoning incident will undoubtedly make working together more difficult. This could be further developed and expanded with additional staff time.

Given what has happened at Invercauld this is, quite frankly, deluded. How can there be trust while raptors continue to disappear? Rather than “solid foundations” it would be closer to the truth to say that the poisoning of the eagle shows that the ECMP has been built built on sand.

Despite Invercauld’s departure from the ECMP, progress on developing sustainable moorland management is reported in the Nature Action Plan, under the traffic light evaluation system so beloved by our bureaucracies, as amber *not* red:

Moorland and	ECMP	Partners in the East Cairngorms Moorland	
Peatland Pilot new approaches in the ECMP to establish, deliver and promote across the National Park a shared understanding of sustainable moorland management.		Partnership continue to investigate opportunities for more sustainable management, including gathering data on moorland burning, hare populations, wader breeding success and opportunities for woodland expansion. Moorland managers awaiting Scottish Government direction from Werrity Report, including licencing of driven grouse moors, which will impact management principles.	

Five and a half years after being created, the best that can be said is the ECMP is continuing *“to investigating opportunities for more sustainable management”* and is awaiting further action from the Scottish Government.

As an indication of the sort of work that is being done the Board papers report:

“Balmoral estate, and other landowners in Deeside, are gathering stakeholder opinion on capercaillie issues to inform a questionnaire for distribution later this summer.”

As far as I am aware, capercaillie are now once again practically extinct on Deeside, so what this will achieve is unclear. But it sounds good and helps to distract the public from the ongoing conservation failures at Balmoral and the surrounding estates, most notably the destruction of the woodland habitat that capercaillie require through the maintenance of high deer numbers and the use of muirburn for sporting purposes. It is well past time that the CNPA reported openly on what the ECMP has actually achieved.

Unfortunately, there is no video recording on the CNPA website of the Board Meeting. I have been unable to find out therefore if Board Members questioned what the ECMP has achieved or discussed how they might promote conservation now Invercauld is no longer part of the partnership. That both the Board and the Senior Management Team should have done so is demonstrated by a paper on governance considered at an additional meeting of the CNPA Board held on 28th May ([see here](#)):

Areas Appropriate To Board Scrutiny and Assurance (Ref para 24)

Non-Executive Board Responsibility	Executive Management Responsibility
Consideration and assurance about what is to be delivered / achieved: the end point of decision or investment	Determination of how actions and investment is to be designed to best deliver agreed outcomes
Consideration of whether a project is delivering against agreed strategic outcomes / agreed performance indicators	Consideration, decision and review of how the project or activity is being managed, designed and delivered.

This raises the question of whether the ECMP been delivering strategic outcomes against agreed performance indicators and, if so, what are these performance indicators (apart from the elimination of raptor persecution which we know has failed)?

There was another comment in the Chief Executive's report which indicates that other aspects of partnership working with Invercauld had also failed:

"Peatland: A project on Invercauld Estate is not going ahead due to difficulties in agreeing reasonable access to carry out the work."

So why was there no officers report to the CNPA Board meeting analysing what the ECMP has achieved, what has gone wrong and putting forward options for the future? Or is the CNPA now just going to try and pretend that Invercauld, which comprises almost a tenth of the National Park, does not exist?

How much public money has been wasted at Invercauld?

How much the CNPA and Nature Scot have spent on peatland restoration on Invercauld and other estates in the National Park does not appear to be public, a basic failure in transparency (I will ask). But the Scottish Rural Payments database shows that in 2019 Invercauld received £162,493 for forest expansion:

Beneficiary Name: INVERCAULD ESTATES

Town/ City: BALLATER

Postcode: AB35

Year: 2019

MEASURE DESCRIPTION	PAYMENT
Investment in forest area development and improvement of the viability of forests	£162,493.90
Agri-environment-climate	£742.08
Forest environmental and climate services and forest conservation	£984.00

In effect what appears to have been happening is that our public authorities have been trying to incentivise – bribe might be a better word? – estates like Invercauld to undertake small conservation projects while allowing them to continue to burn vast areas of moorland for grouse shooting (just take a look on google earth), a practice that destroys woodland and peat formation.

What needs to happen?

The CNPA Board and the Scottish Government both need to recognise that the voluntary approach to improving moorland management has failed. Instead of trying to cover up what has gone wrong, they need now to publish a comprehensive report of what the ECMP had actually changed in the last five years. My suspicion, based on what I have seen on the ground, is that in much of the area – with the notable exception of Mar Lodge Estate which is managed by the National Trust for Scotland – the management of grouse moors has continued to intensify over the last five years. The problems, including the collapse of wildlife, are likely to have got worse, not better. If the CNPA dispute that, they should publish information to show what has changed.

The partnership failure has implications both for the CNPA and the Scottish Government's implementation of the recommendations of the Werritty Review of grouse moor management. It cannot be acceptable that the CNPA, which has a statutory duty to promote conservation, allows

Invercauld to ignore its conservation agenda, destroy the land through burning and allow its staff to eradicate raptors. It should now, as I have been arguing for over five years on parkswatch ([see here for example](#)), start a consultation on how it could use its conservation making powers (and ask NatureScot to do the same by creating Nature Conservation Orders) to force Invercauld and other sporting estates which are unwilling to co-operate to change.

The Scottish Government meantime should not just be aiming to implement the recommendations of the Werritty Review but to strengthen them to deal with estates, like Invercauld, that have shown they won't do so voluntarily. Unfortunately, the latest indications are that the Scottish Government is still dragging its feet on the reform of grouse moors ([see here](#)). Unless there is considerable pressure from the public, that is unlikely to change.

Parkswatch has argued for some time that the Royal Family provides one of the main blocks to conservation in the Cairngorms National Park, whether this is the high deer numbers that are preventing forest regeneration at Balmoral ([see here](#)) or the intensive grouse moor management at Princes Charles' estate at Delnadamph ([see here](#)). Both estates are in the ECMP. I was very pleased therefore that others have now decided it is time to call the Royal Family to account, A petition ([see here](#)) calling on them to rewild their land, to match their words with actions, has now reached over 66,000 signatures. If you haven't done so, please consider adding your name and, if you have time, consider writing to your locally elected representatives asking them to call on the Royal Family to take action before the Climate Change conference in Glasgow this Autumn.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. grouse moors
4. land reform
5. landed estates
6. Scottish Government
7. wildlife persecution

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