

The state of the Cairngorms National Park (1) – muirburn madness

Description



Muirburn on the banks of the Allt Cuaich, downstream of the Munro, Meall Cuaich

The contrast between good land management and bad land management on the western side of the Cairngorms National Park and the impact this is having on the climate and environmental crises is quite stark. I spent the last week on Speyside, collecting evidence about what is happening on the ground while out and about enjoying myself. I have already touched on Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)) and the Beaulieu Denny ([see here](#)) and plan a series of posts over the next few weeks based on what I saw.

In my view all muirburn is bad for the environment, releasing carbon and particulates in atmosphere, promoting water run off from hillsides and killing off wildlife to create a grouse monoculture. What I witnessed yesterday, on the banks of the Allt Cuaich, epitomised the stupidity of the practice. With global warming the incidence of intense rain events is increasing in Scotland, promoting landslips and destructive flash floods. Exposed river banks are particularly vulnerable and the best protection is a healthy covering of vegetation. Yet those responsible for muirburn on the Phones, Etteridge and

Cuaich Estate have been deliberately destroying vegetation along the bank, leaving areas of exposed mineral soil just waiting to be washed away.



While heather (darker green) has in time colonised some of the ground that has been subject to burning, unless or until that happens the steep slope is even more vulnerable to water erosion and landslips (as you can see on the right of the photo). Guidance from the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency ([see here](#)) states that trees offer the best means of stabilising river banks. That guidance appears to have had absolutely no influence on the way the estate has managed the grouse moor on the north side of the Allt Cuaich.

The guidance in the Muirburn Code ([see here](#)) about burning on river banks is completely unfit for purpose given the climate and environmental emergencies:

Waterbodies (rivers, burns, lochs and lochans)

Edge of waterbodies

- Vegetation at the edge of waterbodies protects banks from erosion and reduces water and sediment run-off.
- Fire-free buffer zones should be established:
 - 2m wide for watercourses less than 2m wide.
 - 5m wide for watercourses more than 2m wide, lochs and lochans.
- Watercourses should not be used as primary firebreaks. In an emergency they can be considered as a back-up to cover the failure of a primary firebreak.
- Wetter vegetation or dips in the ground beside watercourses may be suitable as firebreaks. Cutting may also be used to create firebreaks. Techniques to ensure low fire intensity can increase the effectiveness of firebreaks.

For steep and vulnerable slopes such as those along the Allt Cuaich, it should be obvious that the whole bank should be protected. It also appears that in the case of the Allt Cuaich some of the muirburn contravenes the current guidance with some burning having started within 5 metres of the bank.

Rather, however, than trying to develop a licensing system which produces complicated rules about where muirburn can and cannot take place, it would be much simpler to ban the practice completely, starting with our National Parks. The question Mairi MacAllan, the new Minister responsible should be asking, is how come such disastrous land-management practices are continuing in the Cairngorms National Park? And how can this be allowed to take place right next to the largest and most successful conservation project in the National Park, on land owned by Anders Povslen and managed by Wildland Ltd, where muirburn has ceased and driven grouse shooting has been replaced by walked up grouse shooting?

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. muirburn
4. natural environment

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Author

nickkempe