The state of the Cairngorms (5) – environmental catastrophe and the funicular

Description

Storms and construction work

The funicular construction works 14th July, a few days after the intense rainstorms which affected parts of Speyside. Photo credit Louise Brimelow

While my own walk round Cairn Gorm on my week in Speyside was affected by a heavy shower (see here) , I hate to think what might have happened had the torrential downpours which occurred in Grantown and Glen Banchor a few days before before (see here) had hit the mountain.

The risks were recently illustrated by the destructive landslide at Atami in Japan, following which:

"The governor of Shizuoka prefecture, Heita Kawakatsu, said authorities would investigate if building projects in the area had reduced the mountain's ability to retain water and triggered the mudslide" (see here).

Two weeks ago there were heaps of excavated material all the way up the funicular:

Photo credit Louise Brimelow 14th July.

Photo credit Louise Brimelow

Lower down a heap of excavated material had been placed downhill of a pier and beneath the beams supporting the rails – apparently to protect peat – where it would have been offered some protection against rain. Photo Credit Louise Brimelow.

Whatever the merits of repairing the funicular, heaping piles of excavated material and imported material all the way up the construction site *at the same time* is not a sensible idea in a mountain environment. The work should have been phased. By luck Highlands and Islands Enterprise may get away with it……unlike those developers in Japan.

Altering the ecology of the mountain

While a reasonable amount of care was taken to protect the mountain environment at Cairn Gorm when the funicular was originally constructed, the extensions to the existing piers has increased its footprint considerably.

Anchor block extension. Photo credit one of my Cairngorm companions

The amount of concrete – 900 kg of CO_2 is emitted in the fabrication of every ton of cement – being added to the funicular to prop it up and stop it sliding downhill is considerable.

While only the pre-constructed blocks which will support the metal props will be visible once construction is complete, below they are supported by much larger blocks of concrete. Photo credit my Cairngorm companion.

As well as the concrete, significant quantities of imported aggregate have been used in the construction. Together they have altered what remained of the natural granite based soils around the funicular and will change the drainage patterns, with unpredictable consequences.

The cost of removing all this additional concrete and material once the funicular does reach the end of its life would be enormous. The decision to repair of the funicular means it never will. HIE has effectively altered the ecology of the mountain until another ice age or plate tectonics do what it won't, clean up and restore properly.

Beside the impact of the actual construction, the area around was being treated like any old construction site with little regard for the natural environment.

The planning application claimed that the original funicular construction tracks above the mid-station which had been restored would be uncovered and re-used. This always was nonsense. What the photo shows it that Balfour Beatty has been allowed to bring in imported aggregate to surface a new “temporary” access track. It is hard to see how this can ever be removed – it is spilling all over the mountain – and its still not clear what will be done with this and all the surplus material displaced from the pits. Spread it around, perhaps, and hope for the best?

What was being done to the peaty areas was as bad:


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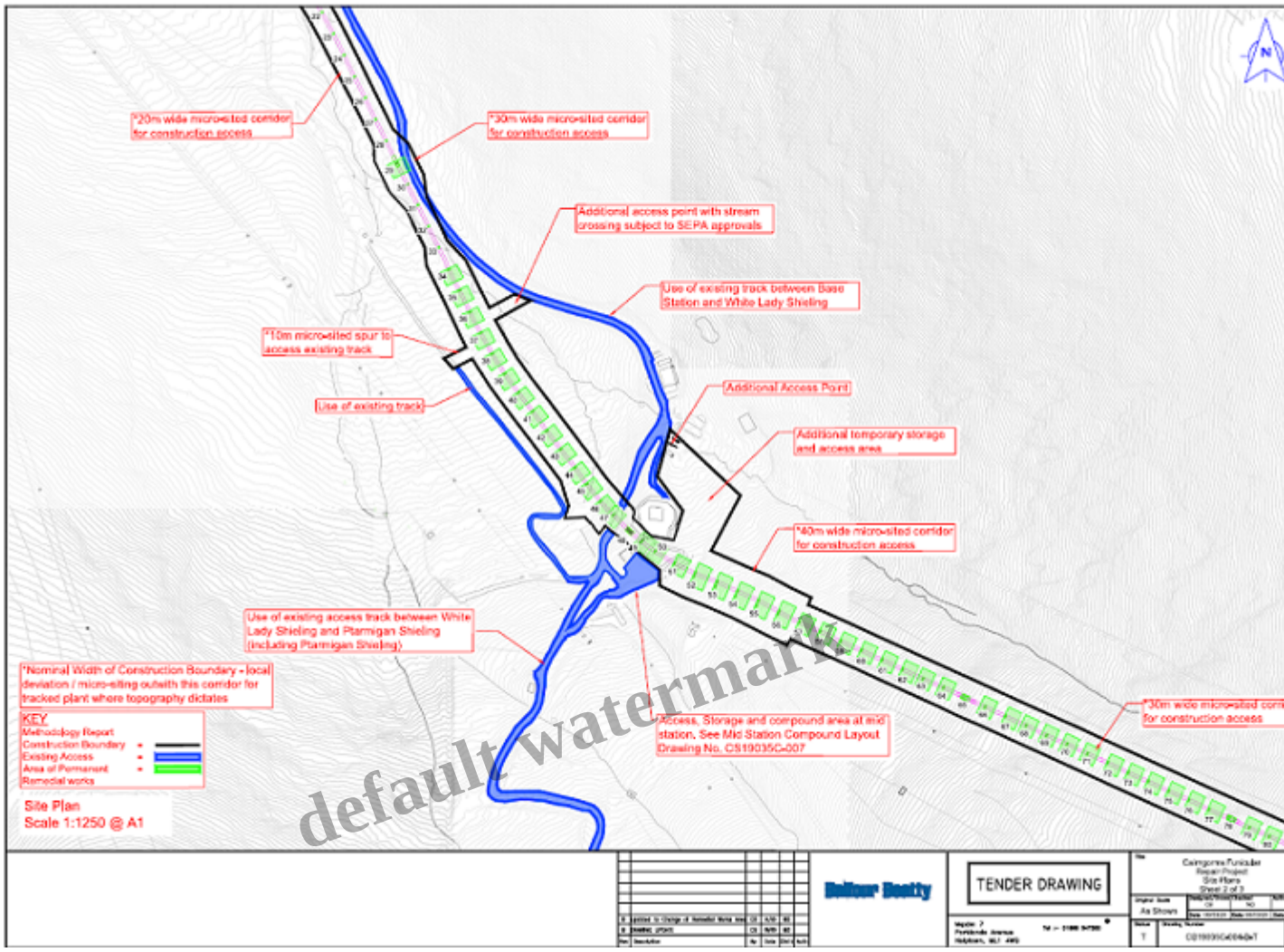
No signs of the ground being protected, the peaty turf (centre foreground) is not being stored properl while large quantities of excavated material have been dumped on peaty vegetation outwith the construction corridor. Photo credit my Cairngorm companion.

"*SUSTAINABLE PEAT MANAGEMENT: SEPA welcomes the utilisation of existing tracks where possible and acknowledge that there is little scope for mitigation in terms of reducing volumes of excavated peat with regards to the proposed new pier supports* [yet more carbon emissions]. *However, there appears to be scope for further mitigation in relation to the new temporary tracks proposed with a significant volume of peat estimated to be excavated for these in table 3 of the Outline Peat Management Plan and SEPA therefore request that all temporary tracks where peat would otherwise be excavated comprise of geotextile or plastic track matting unless there is a significant technical reason why this is not feasible".* (Extract from the CNPA Committee Report on the Planning Application).

The failure of the CNPA to enforce planning conditions



The construction corridor outlined in black, 20m at the top and 30m for the rest, apart from 6 piers above the mid-station. The shieling, outlined in grey, and mid-station are just below centre in the pla

According to the plans approved by the CNPA Planning Committee, the width of the construction corridor for the funicular repairs works would be:

- 20m where new bearings and pier strengthening was required (generally lower down the hill – top left in map above);
- 30m where new props were required to strengthen the piers which were toppling over (generally from 10 piers below the mid station to the funicular tunnel);
- 40m for the six piers above the mid-station; and
- a few section where where there were projecting access spurs and storage areas.

Just why some temporary storage areas were included in the construction site and others were not, was never explained:

The temporary storage area above the shieling, marked as lying within the construction site appears mostly unused albeit an enormous new track has been constructed..

These piles of sand and aggregate, together with the sheeting, lie outwith the construction area, the shaded blue area in the plans above

To their credit, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency in their response to the planning application had queried the construction site area and noted *"that should the construction site area be over 4ha, a Construction Site Licence (CSL) would be required."* That never appears to have been followed up by the CNPA.

It is now abundantly clear that significant stretches of the construction site are far wider than those shown in the plans and this is in planning terms having a further completely "unnecessary" impact on

the surrounding natural environment.

Evidence of work impact on areas outwith the construction corridor, by the heap of soil/peat lower right and higher up the mountain the construction has clearly affected an area more than 30m wideSo why didn't the Cairngorms National Park Authority insist the construction corridor was first sized and then marked out properly? Why has it since not taken enforcement action o this and other issues (like failure to store vegetation)? It was quite predictable that, given their record, HIE and Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd would make little effort to ensure planning conditions were kept, so why weren't CNPA Planning staff out on site each day?

The answer is not just a matter of resources – the poor frontline staff who are technically responsible for enforcing planning conditions don't have time to do so – it is also a failure of will on the part of the CNPA. This gives out a terrible message, if Cairn Gorm – the mountain that should have been the jewel in the crown of the Cairngorms National Park – cannot be protected, then no mountain in Scotland is safe from the type of depredations that are currently being carried out there in the name of sustainable development.

It is important that those who care about Cairn Gorm keep protesting and continue to make the argument that HIE should have no place on the mountain. In a further post I will look at further

evidence from my visit that suggests the repairs to the funicular are botched in conception and may not work that long.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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3. CNPA
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8. restoration

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