The Cairngorms through the lens of Adam Watson (3) â?? Coire Cas, the long view

Description



1981.09.25 Coire Cas

I had not intended to leave it two months before featuring another of Adam Watsonâ??s photos (see here). He took this photo of the upper part of Coire Cas shortly before the Lurcherâ??s Gully Public Inquiry in 1981 at which he presented scientific evidence about the impact of ski developments at Cairn Gorm.

Ten years earlier Adam Watson had taken another photo from the same vantage point. This is featured on the cover and inside his book â??Human impacts on the Northern Cairngormsâ?• (published 2012) the first half of which contains the evidence he presented to the Lurchersâ?? Inquiry:



Coire Cas in September 1970, roads, bulldozed pistes, bare ground, reseeded grass

Despite the re-seeding by the end of the 1970s Coire Cas was hardly in a better state than at the beginning.

At the Lurcherâ??s Inquiry Adam Watson presented evidence about snow-patch vegetation â?? the plant communities that can survive for long periods under snow â?? which he regarded as the most reliable indicator of areas suitable for skiing. The longest single stretch of such vegetation in the northern corries, 1720 metres, was in Coire na Ciste. The longest stretch in Coire Cas, 710m was down the White Lady, followed by 700m along the Allt a Choire Cas. There was a 300m stretch of snowpatch vegetation on Fiacaill a Choire Cas â?? the ridge on the right in the photo â?? so it is hardly surprising that most of the time the opportunities for skiing there were quite limited.

Despite the evidence about snow lie, it was in Coire Cas that the Highlands and Islands Development Board tried to concentrate downhill snowsports and the result was the widespread destruction visible in these photos. By removing the lift infrastructure in Coire na Ciste, Highlands and Islands Enterprise have abandoned the area best suited to snowsports at Cairn Gorm.

What Highlands and Islands Enterprise now appear to be trying to do is to turn Coire Cas from a failing ski area into a summer playground. In doing so they have subjected it to further extensive earthworks and there are more in the pipeline. These include:

The work to repair the funicular by propping up and strengthening the foundations of its leaning towers;



Upper section of funicular repairs prior to â??restorationâ?• 20th September 2021. Photo credit George Paton.

New roads around the Shieling;



Photo Credit George Paton 20th September 2021 â?? note the disturbed peat on the left of the funicular.

Four new roads have been created since Adam Watson took his photographs. To the left of the â??newâ?• Shieling Building, which is no longer in use, there are two short roads visible: the slanting (grey) one on the left was the subject of my recent post on new roads on Cairn Gorm (see here); the zig zag road to the right never had planning permission but Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd is now proposing to remove it. To the right of the funicular are two parallel roads: the one on the left is part of the funicular repairs and is supposed to be temporary but covers part of the area where it is now proposed to create a mountain bike track; the one to the right â?? the Shieling track â?? was created unlawfully but granted retrospective planning permission by the Cairngorms National Park Authority in January 2017 (see here).

Above the Shieling there is more:



More temporary repair track and â??restoredâ?• ground above (on left of funicular). Photo credit Gordon Bulloch 4th November 2021

Since Adam Watson took his photos the ground in Coire Cas has continued to be re-worked on a regular basis. Despite his efforts to reduce human impacts on Cairn Gorm, while providing better skiing, HIE has continued to treat Coire Cas like a building site. What was left of natural landforms and vegetation cover following the original ski development and subsequent construction of the funicular continues to be eroded away, bit by bit.

Why, one might ask, does this matter if the place is so trashed? Part of the answer, as Adam documented in â??Human impactsâ?•, is that ground disturbance weakens soil cohesiveness and is associated with floods and surface erosion. The ground is inherently unstable, glacial material on a weathered granite base, and the soils poorly bonded. Under the influence of gravity and water it is all moving downhill and that is the most likely explanation for the tilting funicular towers. The current funicular repair works will at best only slow those processes down but at worst could destabilise the slope further. There has been no assessment of those risks.

The story behind Adam Watsonâ??s 1981 photo is as relevant now as it was then. That should be reason enough for the Cairngorms National Park Authority to take a precautionary approach to creation of any new roads at Cairn Gorm and the planning application to create beginnersâ?? mountain bike tracks which I will consider in a further post.

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Date Created
March 3, 2022
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