

Highland and Islands Enterprise and Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd

Description

"All the gear, no idea"

It describes your requirements perfectly: novices who splash out on expensive equipment but who lack the aptitude to use it properly or even to perform satisfactorily in the subject endeavour.

Well, that might describe staff at Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) but certainly not at Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL).

So what is the problem at Cairn Gorm?

Despite having more money thrown at it than any other ski business in the U.K., e.g.

- (1) 100% funding for any equipment that they need whereas the other Scottish resorts get at best 40%,
- (2) The largest snow factory in Scotland and at least 10 snow cannon to cater for a beginners area and up to 1000 customers per day (more about snow-making in another post),
- (3) A piste basher with detachable cabin that can take up to 20 people up the mountain but never seems to be used!
- (4) Plus a forecast subsidy of up to £3,000,000 p.a.,

yet CMSL is losing its share to other ski businesses in Scotland and unable to generate significant revenue.

There can be a major problem in any business when the management know more about the business than the owners, the front-line staff more than the management, neither are listened to or become alienated. They can then run rings around the owners because the owners don't have any idea about how to run their particular business!

How many HIE staff are actually qualified to operate a snow sports business? How many of the board of directors at CMSL are qualified? Some of the staff at CMSL have been employed for over 20 years, know the business inside out and yet the whole operation is a shambles. As far as I am aware there is only one person in the U.K. who is actually qualified to manage a ski resort and he doesn't work at Cairn Gorm!

Now take a look at the other ski resorts, Glencoe, Glenshee and The Lecht, who are doing a fantastic job (despite a general lack of qualified managers!), investing in what the snow sports community want,

rather than a theme park on a mountain, and taking an ever increasing share of the snow sports market. A can-do attitude, where owners, managers and staff work together, whereas on Cairn Gorm it sometimes appears that with some of the staff it's been a case of "why bother when we're getting paid anyway". How did Cairngorm Mountain get to that position?

Below I give some examples, which I have not used on parkswatch before, to illustrate the problems.

Maintenance failures

The following quote is from a report to HIE by King Sturge dated **21/02/2011**. " Report on Maintenance and Repair Models and Procurement Options for the Appointment of the Operator of the Facilities at Cairn Gorm Mountain".

"3.1 At present CML are responsible for maintaining the existing site including all parts of the infrastructure and buildings and in particular the main funicular railway and ski tows in accordance with the lease which exists between HIE and CML. It is apparent, however that CML have only been undertaking a basic maintenance regime over the last few years. This is as a direct result of a number of factors, the main ones being a lack of appropriate income over a number of years and the practice of the operator being to carry out maintenance on a piecemeal basis over a number of years."

Over and over the comments from companies carrying out inspections and reports at CML/ CMSL are the same, poor quality and reactive maintenance.

Parkswatch has covered the exposed ring main on several occasions ([see here](#)), but until I found this paragraph on page 80 of a report by the same company, King Sturge, issued in **MARCH 2011** we did not know how long the problem had existed:-

"It was noted during our survey that there are lengthy sections of Hydro Board ring main cabling very close to the surface of trenches. These are currently covered by sand bags. The section of cabling noted runs between the Coire na Ciste (Base 4) building and the Aonach building, where 1 leg of the cabling has been cut. This may mean that the ring main facility is not operating and this was reported to staff at the time of the survey.

The actual survey was carried out on 26/10/2010!

Visitor research

But back to "all the gear, no idea".

This year the Scottish Government have commissioned the following:-

IBP Strategy and Research and Ekos have been commissioned by the Scottish Government to commission research into the impact of climate change on mountain resorts and artificial slopes in Scotland as part of research into the impact of Scotland's climate change strategy.

It was Ekos that was commissioned by HIE/ Scottish Enterprise to conduct the Scottish Snowsports Strategic Review, Part A of which was published in September 2011 ([see here](#)). Ekos appear to have conducted the same survey 11 years ago. How many times do you engage a consultant to carry out a survey of the same thing?

Well in HIE's case there has been Ekos in 2011, SE Group in 2018 plus their update when the funicular failed, then the masterplanners and now in 2022 Ekos again. Five times in eleven years and at what cost?

Ignoring recommendations about the importance of snowsports

I have extracted a couple of screen shots from the 2011 Ekos report, shown below, but recommend that you read the whole report as it shows that despite the consultant's best efforts to show a way forward, that has been completely ignored by HIE at Cairn Gorm!"

The average onsite spends of a snowsports enthusiast or a downhill mountain biker has been calculated. The average spends for these activity enthusiasts is more than double the onsite spend of sightseers:

AVERAGE ONSITE VISITOR SPENDS AT 2009/10 PRICES	
Visitor Type	£ Ex VAT
Skier, Snowboarder	£22.85
Downhill Mountain Biker	£21.50
Sightseer and Other	£11.17
Total	£17.68

Source: TRC Research

This chart shows that if you can maintain the same number of skier days as sightseers and others (which in 2009/10 was 130,191) then CMSL would be self-sufficient and yet HIE are trying to reduce those skier days.

In the 1986 ski season Cairn Gorm recorded 347,902 skier days. In 2010 that would have produced an income of an astonishing £7,949,561! Yet, at those prices the current forecast by HIE of 30,000 skier days results in an income of a mere £685,500!

The 2nd screen shot is from page 21 of the report and a compelling argument, especially in the light of climate change:-

~~upper piste level (see overleaf), however to a much lesser extent.~~ This suggests that skiing at the higher piste levels is less weather dependant, likely because snow levels are greater throughout the season. If the ski centres can give better, regular access to this high snow then business levels may be less weather-dependent.

After commissioning and paying for this report, HIE then moved the training/ beginner area to the Ptarmigan, as recommended. But subsequently, with the full approval of the three local ski schools, first they installed a rope tow below the shieling and bulldozed that slope and they then bulldozed the lower part of the Cas, the lowest part of the ski area, to form.... The Beginner Slope.

To cap that HIE then installed a snow factory on the **LOWEST** part of the mountain, where it is least likely to work (although currently there is a proposal to move it up the hill by 300m).

What needs to happen.

It is inconceivable that front-line staff at CMSL don't know the only sensible way forward is to relocate the snow factory to the Shielling, probably with the restaurant re-built, where it could be used to build a snow base on the lower areas of the Cas, M1, White Lad. It could also be used for, yes you've guessed it, the rope/trainer tow below the Shielling, or, why not a beginner area at the bottom of the Lady?

With the additional use of the ten or so snow cannon strategically placed around the same area that would greatly increase the available ski area for a longer period over winter. However, as long as the funicular was out of action that would require either people to walk up to the Shielling, as was done in the early 1960's, or maybe a shuttle bus service?

BUT remember this, a reply I received from the CEO of CMSL Susan Smith?

“ Existing people within this company are best placed and have the knowledge of what is required to make the ski area better, whilst maximising the opportunities for ecological diversity”.

“All the gear, no idea”.

Category

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