HIEâ??s mountain bike trails â?? a â??neutral impactâ?• on the landscape character of Cairn Gorm?



Just over a year ago the Cairngorms National Park Authority approved a planning application (see here for papers) to build â??family friendlyâ?• mountain bike tracks in Coire Cas at Cairn Gorm. Two magic carpets, to be used as uplift, were constructed just before the start of the winter (see here). The construction of the main trails is now underway and in the last few days several people have contacted parkswatch to express concern about what is going on.



One metre wide? The approved plans do show two downhill bike tracks close together near the top of the trails â?? it is clear now that has resulted in double the destruction without any clear benefits (both tracks are of a similar angle). Why did the CNPA not question this? Photo credit Parkswatch Reader.

When I wrote about Highland and Island Enterpriseâ??s planning application last year I highlighted a number of deficiencies in the documentation, including the fact that none of the cross sections for the trails showed their width. The CNPA Committee Report subsequently clarified the position, presumably on the basis of verbal assurances from Cairngorm Mountain Ltd/HIE as there was nothing in writing:

â??10. The trails are to be constructed of a compacted subbase and finished with a 25mm dust, compacted surface. The widths of the trails will predominantly be of 1 metre or below, with straighter trail sections reduced to 0.75m. Landings and run offs are generally less than 2m for short sections at approximately 6 to 7 metres in length at the feature. A small number of higher rider level features are more than 2m for 6 to 7 metres in length.â?•

Cairngorm Mountain Resort
May 26 at 5:02 PM ·

🚵Work continues behind the scenes as we prepare to introduce exciting new trails for our family-friendly mountain biking activities!

Opening this summer, these brand-new biking trails will allow our visitors to experience the mountain in a new and fun way. We'll offer bike hire as well as conveyor uplifts to take cyclists 200 metres up the trails making it a perfect experience for families, beginners and intermediates to cycle back down.

Stay tuned as we push our plans into the next gear!



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If the trails really are intended to be only 1m wide â?? and the photos on the CML Facebook photo suggest otherwise â?? why has the CNPA not taken enforcement action and why has it allowed such a wide construction track? That is completely unnecessary when it comes to creating mountain bike tracks as this photo taken in Glen Coe last week shows:



Construction work on new mountain bike trail at Glen Coe â?? note the size of the digger. (Five years ago I expressed concerns about the construction of this road up to the Glen Coe ski area https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2018/08/08/time-to-stop-the-desecration-of-glen-coe-and-glen-etive-1/).

The reason for the enormous construction corridors appears to be that McGowans has chosen to use large diggers and there is nothing in the planning documentation that prevents them from doing so:



Two of the three large diggers working on site and creating another great scar across the flank of Fia aâ?? Choire Cas. Note the heap of turfs and boulders in the foreground. Photo credit Parkswatch re

The original Construction Method Statement, which is less than two pages long, starting with some fine words from the designer CRC Trails about the need to take care on a site that is â??exceptionally environmentally sensitiveâ?•:

CAIRNGORM MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAILS

Construction Method Statement

1. Scope of Work

The construction works proposed will be carefully executed to minimise the environmental impact as the site is exceptionally environmentally sensitive. All method statements and RAMS documentation must follow the guidelines set out in HIE document – *'Working with the Environment at Cairngorm'.* For ease of reference, that document is attached as *Annex 1* to this Method Statement.

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Highland and Island Enterprise (HIE)â??s â??Working with the Environment at Cairn Gormâ?• â?? created from earlier guidance after destruction caused by the Natural Retreats Shieling Rope tow fiasco (see here) â?? reinforces this, stating:

â??Excavation of turf of grass/heather mat and roots, peat, mineral soil, gravel and boulders should be carefully undertakenâ?•.

In April a further Construction Method Statement was lodged by McGowan, the contractor, and approved by the CNPA. It says nothing about the width of the tracks though it does specify that large diggers would be used. It also contains provisions about the removal and storage of vegetation:

McGOWAN
NATURALLY DIFFERENT

Initial Vegetation Layer Removal

- Ensuring the newly constructed trails, have minimal impact on the surrounding environment, every effort shall be given in ensuring as much vegetation from the trail section footprint is saved for later re-use at reinstatement of areas. Ultimately, upon completion, the only bare soil/aggregate surface visible should be the new trail footprint.
- Using an excavator, initial work will see the existing vegetation layer being removed and carefully set aside and stored vegetation side upwards for future re-use at reinstatement of any damaged areas and sides of newly created berms.
- The initial vegetation removal will also include the side ditch footprint. This will allow for top-side ditch-lines to be excavated and formed as vegetation removal process progresses.
- Where possible any newly formed ditch-line will be reinstated with vegetated turf sods at earliest opportunity to ensure successful and quick regeneration of turfs/vegetation and further assist in silt capture from groundwater seepage.
- Further silt mitigation in the form of silt mesh traps and clean stone traps will be introduced within the new formed ditch-lines in order to further reduce any potential silt run-off, and crucially, reduce waterflow run force downhill causing erosion of new ditch base.

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The photo above raises questions about how CAREFULLY the work is being undertaken. One wonders how carefully either the CNPA or Cairngorm Mountain Ltd or HIE are monitoring what is going on?

What will the landscape impact of the construction?

The works are behind schedule (construction of the higher trails was supposed to be complete by the end of May) and the current drought will affect vegetation recovery this year. That can only increase the landscape impacts of whatever areas are restored in the short to medium term.

It is too early to judge what the longer term landscape impact is likely to be be. The Landscape assessment submitted to support the planning application was not fit for purpose and contained no visualisation of what the tracks might look like:

Considerate Landscaping & Design

The design process has matched the site potential for the target user, whilst containing the development to minimise disruption to the wider ecology, habitats, and visual extents. The convergence of trails is within the developed ski area, supported by existing infrastructure. Around 80% of the proposed bike park is on ground that has been manipulated by machinery during past skiing development and the whole facility is within the primary activity zone identified in the Cairngorm Mountain Masterplan.

Trails features such as berms and rollers, reduce the trail surface visibility, with the design of the bike park enhancing winter snow sports positively.

The visual impact is mitigated by the proposed setting, situated within lower Coire Cas, which is flanked by the steeper sided ridges of the Aonach and Fiacaill a'Choire Chais. The upper trail is contoured within the Jean's Bowl area below the steeper sided Fiacaill ridge and partly obscured in the upper section by a large moraine. The trails will be further enhanced by Mountain Woodland tree planting, which also reduces visibility in areas compatible with snow sports.

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Effectively, the claim in the planning application was that the new tracks would not be visible from afar and since lower Coire Cas was full of snowsport infrastructure what could be seen locally did not matter anyway. It is not clear most visitors to Cairn Gorm would agree, how Coire Cas looks on arrival is crucial to the quality of the â??visitor experienceâ?•.

The photo showing the fresh scar along the sides of Fiacaill aâ?? Choire Cas suggests that sections of the bike trails may in fact be visible from afar. The report to the CNPA Planning Committee stated that:

â??there is some landscape capacity to develop mountain bike trails in-between the Cairngorm Main Building and Funicular Mid-Stationâ?¦â?¦â?¦..it is important, however, that this does not extend or amplify the existing landscape and visual effects of the ski centre by a significant degree in the National Parkâ?•

The planning assessment unfortunately them seems to have ignored this, claiming that:

â??the wider context is one of rural development and the addition of this development would be seen in the context of the wider ski infrastructure within the developed bowl of this part of Coire Casâ?¦â?¦â?¦â?¦, though there will be adverse landscape and visual effects they are likely to be moderate and not significantâ?¦.. Based on this, the proposal is considered to have a neutral impact on the landscape character.â?¦â?¦â?¦..â?•.

From the current evidence it appears that the CNPAâ??s planning assessment was wide of the mark and the area within Coire Cas that is most affected by intensive development has been significantly extended. As a result the CNPAâ??s failure to insist on a proper visual impact assessment (showing how the trails would look from various viewpoints) appears particularly negligent.

What needs to happen?

The reason that Coire Cas is being turned into a â??rural development zoneâ?• is not just because of HIE, who have never been fit to own a large chunk of what should be one of Scotlandâ??s finest mountains, but because the CNPA has in the twenty years of its existence allowed this to happen and made one poor planning decision after another (despite the efforts of a few Board Members).

The CNPA appears incapable of changing course at Cairn Gorm and any solutions there are going to have to come from elsewhere: the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust and recreational organisations who value the landscape as being integral to the recreational experience (whether snowsports, mountaineering, walking or biking).

In my view new mountain bike trails could have been created at Cairn Gorm and kept the impacts within acceptable bounds. Such trails, though, should have been and might have been better located in the lower part of Coire na Ciste (where they would be far less visible) than Coire Cas. Indeed, snowsports are unlikely to ever again be financially viable at Cairngorm Mountain unless it follows the example of other ski centres in Scotland and creates uplift that can be used by both skiers and bikers.


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Dual use chairlift at Glen Coe â?? it may be ancient and slow but is far better than anything at Cairn Gorm

However, the current work shows that the sceptics, like the North East Mountain Trust, who expressed concerns about the development of mountain bike trails at Cairn Gorm may have been right. At the very least no further developments of any sort should be allowed on the mountain until it is transferred to new owners who are prepared to put the landscape and conservation first.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. HIE
4. hill tracks
5. landscape
6. planning

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