The proposal to plant Coire na Ciste on Cairn Gorm – a new low for conservation in the National Park

Description

The caption reads “A solitary pine clings to the hillside in Coire na Ciste. A rare survivor in an otherwise treeless landscape”. Propaganda credit Spey Catchment IniitiatveA month ago, on 15th April, the Spey Catchment Initiative (SCI), a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), formed in December 2022 issued a news release announcing it was to plant 30,000 trees in the upper parts of Coire na Ciste on Cairn Gorm (see here). This project, intended to make a major landscape change in the northern corries of the Cairngorms, was subject to zero public consultation, unlike almost every other forestry planting project in Scotland.

The caption to the photo above is false on three counts: the pine is not solitary, as is obvious from the photo; the pine is not a survivor but a relatively young tree that has colonised the coire – most probably from the Caledonian Pinewood in Glenmore below; and the landscape is not “otherwise treeless” but increasingly covered with trees as the Caledonian Forest naturally regenerates up the hill.

Chris Townsend explained this in an excellent blog post soon after the news emerged (see here) : “natural regeneration is always preferable to planting and it’s flourishing in Coire na Ciste. Spending time and money planting trees here would be a waste of time and money and could well disturb the trees already there. The forest should be left to grow and expand at its own rate and in its own time.”

The SCI's claims about their plan to plant Coire na Ciste

Almost all the captions to the photos accompanying SCI's news release (currently still available for viewing here) continue in the same vein. For example:

Extract from photo with the caption: "The Allt na Ciste burn winds through the treeless coire – but by 2025, new planting along its banks will help cool the water, stabilise soils and support upland biodiversity"

Treeless?

Extract from photo with the caption: “A small trial of montane willow and birch was planted in 2024 to test species suitability and site conditions. Lessons learned will inform large-scale planting in 2025”.

Montane willow and birch? Upright specimens of juniper such as this are more like those found in garden centres than the prostrate trees found on exposed slopes in the mountains.

Extract from photo showing naturally regenerated juniper in a far more sheltered location lower down Coire na Ciste. SCI's caption reads: "A close-up of the Allt na Ciste as it winds through the treeless slopes of Coire na Ciste. Planting trees along its banks will help shade the burn, regulate water temperature, reduce erosion and slow run off – making this upland catchment more resilient".

SCI's "treeless slopes" claim is repeated several times in the captions despite the evidence clearly visible in their photos – in the one above besides the juniper (classed as a tree) Scots Pine are clearly visible on the slopes top right.

Extract from photo whose caption reads: “Penny Lawson, Principal Project Officer at the SCI, surveys the planting site in Autumn 2024. The exposed landscape will soon begin a long journey of natural recovery”.

Planting trees is not natural recovery but a form of gardening. SCI’s photo actually shows what natural recovery looks like and it has been happening, contrary to their claims, for some time. Most of “the planting site” is covered in heather, an indication of low grazing pressure, and the bleached stems show some of it has reached the end of its natural life (c24 years). As heather dies this creates spaces where it is easier for trees to regenerate.

In summary, SCI’s photos accompanying their news release show a wilful disregard for the truth and have been used to try and deceive the public about the state of nature in Coire na Ciste.

The minutes of the Coire na Ciste montane woodland meeting of 20th November 2024 (see here) *“Agreed that all publicity material, social media posts, etc will be signed off by all three partners* [i.e Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd and the Cairngorm National Park Authority (CNPA)] *before release.*” If that never happened, the CNPA needs to explain why, but if did sign off the materials it now needs to issue a public apology. Whatever the case it must now withdraw funding from the project before the tree planting is due to start in August.

Why planting Coire na Ciste is wrong

In a letter to the Strathy Dave Morris explained the strategic reasons why planting Coire na Ciste was a bad idea and why any planting on Cairn Gorm should be confined to Coire Cas:

Thursday, April 24, 2025 www.strathspey-herald.co.uk

'climate gravy train'. It is therefore encouraging and refreshing though tantalising to read Mr Fergus Ewing's stated views.

Would that there were more who shared them.

Charles Wardrop
Perth.

It may sound like good approach.. but it is not

PLANTING lots of native trees in the Cairngorms national park sounds like a good idea.

How good, however, depends on where they are planted.

In the northern corries of the Cairngorms planting in Coire Cas is a good idea but not elsewhere in the adjacent corries.

It is therefore a surprise to hear that the Spey Catchment Initiative aims to plant 30,000 native trees in Coire na Ciste (Strathy 17 April), especially when there appears to have been no public consultation about such a proposal.

Most large-scale planting proposals usually have some form of public consultation, sometimes also requiring a legally compliant Environmental Impact Assessment.

Surely such a proposal in our famous northern corries deserves an appropriate level of public scrutiny, given its implications for landscape, wildlife and recreational values?

Increasing forest cover in the Cairngorms and the respective roles of tree planting and natural regeneration has been the subject of much discussion and subsequent agreement since the first conservation measures were put in place in the 1950s following the establishment of the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve and Glenmore National Forest Park.

30,000 TREES AND SHURBS: Montane woodland – one of Scotland's rarest and most threatened habitats – is set to return to the slopes of the Cairngorms through the Coire na Ciste Montane Woodland Project.

Over the following 30 years initial planting projects were undertaken by staff of the Cairngorm Chairlift Company, with some support from the Forestry Commission and Nature Conservancy Council. These are the mature trees seen today close by the buildings in the Cas and the Ciste.

When this planting took place the policy and scientific advice was clear: beyond the buildings the Cas would be the focus for future planting, involving only native species, extending from the upper fringe of the existing Caledonian pinewood, to the highest altitude for tree and shrub growth.

These plans ensured that the planting would be located on bouldery and disturbed areas, minimising any interference with snowsports.

Such planting in the Cas was and still is the best location for delivering public benefit, including the rapid establishment of montane forest, maximising snow cover for winter sports, increasing downstream flooding protection and improving the built landscape in the Cas.

In the other corries, the Ciste and Coire Laogh Mor to the east plus the corries to the west of the Cas, natural regeneration is the correct way to expand the upper fringes of the Caledonian forest.

These principles were reinforced in the most recent native pinewoods conference held in Fort William in October, last year.

Finally, account needs to be taken of the latest report published by the UK Climate Change Committee in February, earlier this year.

In calling for a substantial increase in tree planting rates the UK CCC stated a very important qualification: 'trees are only to be planted on mineral soils, with organic soils excluded to protect diverse habitats and minimise carbon loss from planting disturbance'.

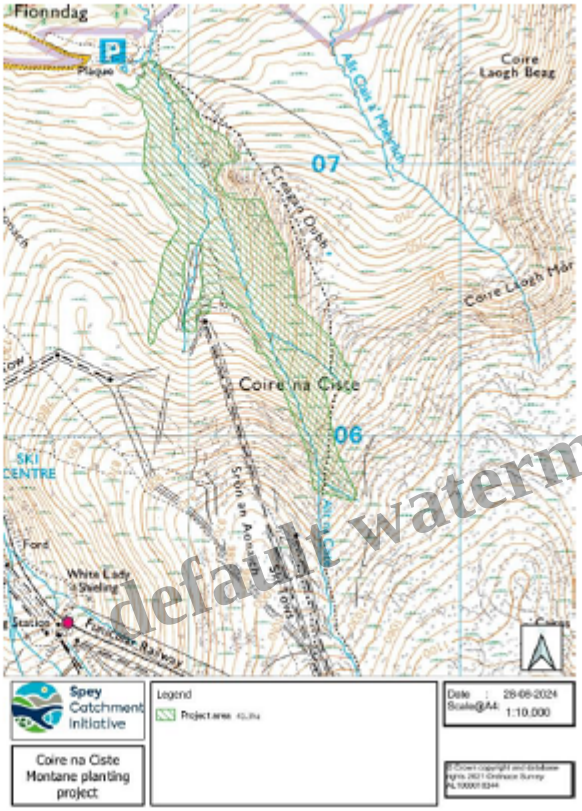
This confirms that the SCI, in order to comply with the latest government advice on climate change, needs to understand that there is far more mineral soil in the Cas in comparison to the organic soils of the Ciste.

It should focus all its planting plans onto the Cas, leaving the existing native forest in Glenmore to gradually expand into the Ciste by natural regeneration only.

Dave Morris
Newtonmore.

I will not repeat Dave's arguments here but the specific justifications the SCI has given for planting Coire na Ciste and its implications deserve more critical scrutiny. What follows is based not just on the claims SCI made in their news release (which lacked any maps or supporting information) but a copyof the full proposal, a minute of a meeting (link above) and a copy of a soil survey which has been supplied by the CNPA in response to a Freedom of Information request.

Extent of Project Area



There is already extensive natural regeneration in the area proposed for planting, particularly on the east bank of the Allt na Ciste. As the Soil Survey Report, written by Andy Kennedy states:

"It appears that regeneration of native species is already occurring and if low grazing pressure is maintained, it is likely in time, that the whole area will regenerate without any additional input."

It is a mystery why despite this evidence the SCI, CNPA and CMSL decided to go ahead with the planting anyway. The project document sets out the following Objectives (justifications) for the planting:

1) Expand the area and altitudinal limit of montane woodland and scrub

Comment: The soil survey notes that "Regeneration is limited at the higher elevations" proposed for planting and "only Rowan and Juniper were found". In other words some tree species are already growing up to the altitudinal limits for the planting! No evidence is provided that more won't do so with time through natural regeneration.

2) Increase the diversity of suitable tree and shrub species

Comment: Having discovered rowan were already on site, the proposal was restricted to "planting low-growing, hardy trees such as dwarf birch, downy birch, and montane willows—all adapted to life above 600 metres":

Tree species	Approx. %
Dwarf birch	20
Downy birch	20
Eared willow	23
Downy willow	27
Minor montane willow spp	10

Comment: at least half those species, to my knowledge, along with others (I have photos of aspen) are already on site. Both downy birch and eared willow are ten a penny trees that readily colonise new ground and there is no justification for planting them.

There is extensive natural regeneration of native broadleaves just upstream of the Ciste car park.

As for the other species, in the absence of information in the project documents, that requires checking but I have heard from someone with expertise in the vegetation of Cairn Gorm that there are no records of Dwarf Birch (Betula Nana) having grown in the area. That is perfectly natural, not every tree species was once found everywhere. However, Objective 3 (below) suggests the other willows are already found in Coire na Ciste If not, willow seeds carry in the wind and it would only be a matter of time before they too colonised the area.

3) Provide an additional seed source for further natural regeneration

Comment: With individual birches and willows producing hundreds and sometimes thousands of seeds you don't need to plant 30,000 trees, as SCI and the CNPA are proposing, to create an additional seed source.

4) Build a habitat corridor to higher altitudes for other woodland species

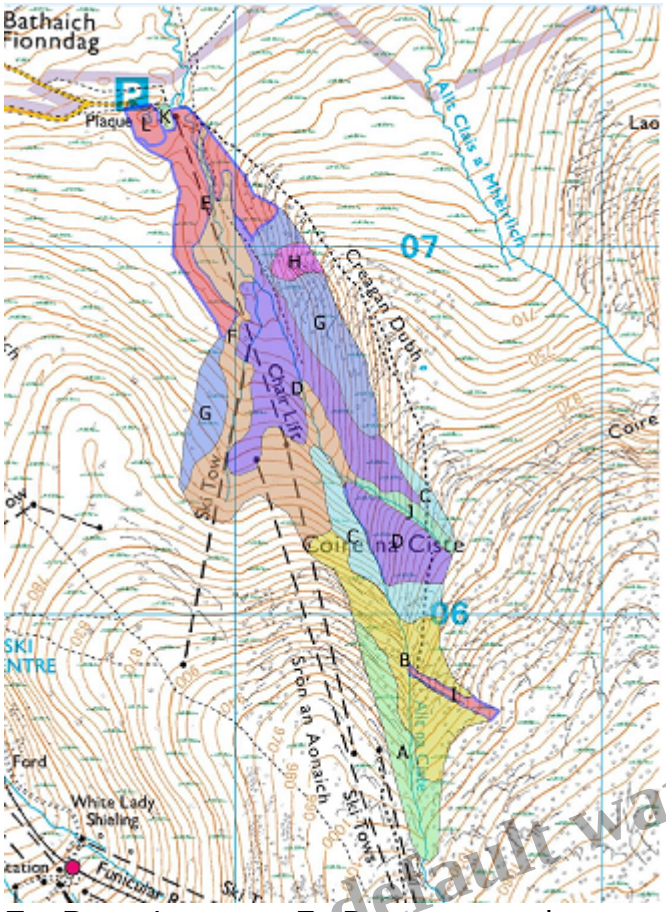
Comment: the meeting minute shows the CNPA were to "contact RBGE (Royal Botanical Gardens Edinburgh0 to find out if they are interested in the site for possible planting of rare montane vascular plants". If the CNPA want to do that they would be better expanding the Alpine garden above the day lodge in Coire Cas which has been sadly neglected by CMSL.

5) Provide shading to the Allt na Ciste to control rising water temperatures

Comment: This objective, repeated in the news release, is complete and utter nonsense. The Allt na Ciste runs almost due north, traps snow and due to the topography is already shaded for much of the year. As SCI's photos show, the vegetation along its banks is already quite dense, providing further shade, and planting dwarf birch and willows will not make any difference to that. The hydrology of the burn makes further nonsense of the claim. The Allt na Ciste is steep and fast flowing, so there is little time for the water flowing down it to heat up even in direct sun. It is also just one of dozens of other tributaries feeding the Spey and contributes a tiny percentage of its total flow so just what the SCI think shading it further will do to the temperature of that river is unclear.

6)Reduce runoff rates to retain rainfall & snowmelt for longer contributing to flood & drought resilience

Comment: the news release also comments the planting will help stop erosion although almost all the bare rock and soil in Coire na Ciste are ABOVE the area to be planted and sparsely vegetated soils are a natural feature of the plateau. Most of the area proposed for planting is already well vegetated with heather or covered in peat (as per the map below) and both of already function to retain rainfall and snow melt.



E = Peaty Ironpans; F =Deep peat and peaty ironpans; L = Disturbed bog. Map credit from Soil Survey

SCI has provided no eviddence to support the claim yhat planting trees in this location will make any appreciable difference.

Ironically, having approved the planning proposals for various developments in Coire Cas which will increase the rate of water run-off into the Allt Mhor which been responsible for serious flood damage in the past (the smoothed beginners area for example (see here)) the CNPA now wants to tinker with a relatively minor tributary of the Spey which is in a much better ecological state.

7) Trial montane woodland planting methods and act as a demonstration site for similar projects

Comment: If the SCI wants to do this they would be far better doing so in Coire Cas

8) Enhance landscape diversity and visual amenity for recreational visitors

Comment: If the CNPA wanted to improve the landscape of Coire na Ciste, it could start by demanding HIE/CMSL do up the building by the car park and also get it to remove all the hardstanding left by the demolition of the lift towers (see here). It would then leave the rest to nature.

The planting proposal & outdoor recreation

Very approximate demarcation of the boundary of the planting, showing (centre) the traverse line back to the lifts. Photo credit SCI.

No consideration is given in the plans to the impact of the planting on outdoor recreation or vice versa.

The map shows that the planting will skirt the lowest remaining ski tow and run just below the traverse line used by downhill skiers and boarders to return to the tow from the Allt na Ciste. However, this takes no account of the fact that when snow conditions are good the groind below the Ciste tow is used by both piste and touring skiers and boarders to descend to the Ciste car park. Much of the west side of the Ciste has boggy ground, with a lot of peaty soil (as shown in the soil survey) so it naturally it will have few trees and lots of open ground, excellent for snowsports and definitely NOT a place to plant trees!.


View up Coire na Ciste from the car park November 2019

The proposal document, dated November 2024, refers to "*Full consultation with CMSL and walking/skiing bodies. Avoid planting near main access routes"* It is unclear if that ever happened or whether the CNPA ever consulted their access team. Had anyone asked Mountaineering Scotland, who represent ski tourers, about the proposal I am fairly confident they would have highlighted the trees will be planted right across the lines most likely to be taken by skiers and boarders in the lower coire. This will clearly have a significant impact on the survival rates of any trees planted there.

The planting, however, provides the perfect excuse for HIE/CMSL to run down what remains of the lift infrastructure in Coire na Ciste still further, in a desperate attempt to force people to use the funicular and despite the fact it holds snow much better than Coire Cas.

What needs to happen?

As Dave Morris argued, the one place where planting trees would be justified at Cairn Gorm is in Coire Cas. That Coire is in a sorry mess visually and it's soils have been moved and compacted time after time due to engineering works and vehicles being driven willy nilly across the site. That has greatly increased the likelihood of catastrophic flooding and landslips. Planting trees in Coire Cas could therefore help avert disaster and mitigate some of the worst landscape impacts of the skidevelopment. Trees would also help to trap/retain the snow like snow fences.

Given CMSL and the CNPA are partners in this project, they now need to explain why they have chosen Coire na Ciste, where nature is doing very well, in preference to Coire Cas for this "conservation" project. By far the best option now would be for the CNPA to transfer the whole planting project to the Cas. It is unlikely anyone, apart possibly from HIE/CMSL, would object and doing so would avoid wasting any trees earmarked for the project. This would be easy enough to do because the project was developed without the involvement of Scottish Forestry and the CNPA holds all the power as it is providing the funding.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. conservation
4. Local communities

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