

## Who lights the fires in the Cairngorms National Park?

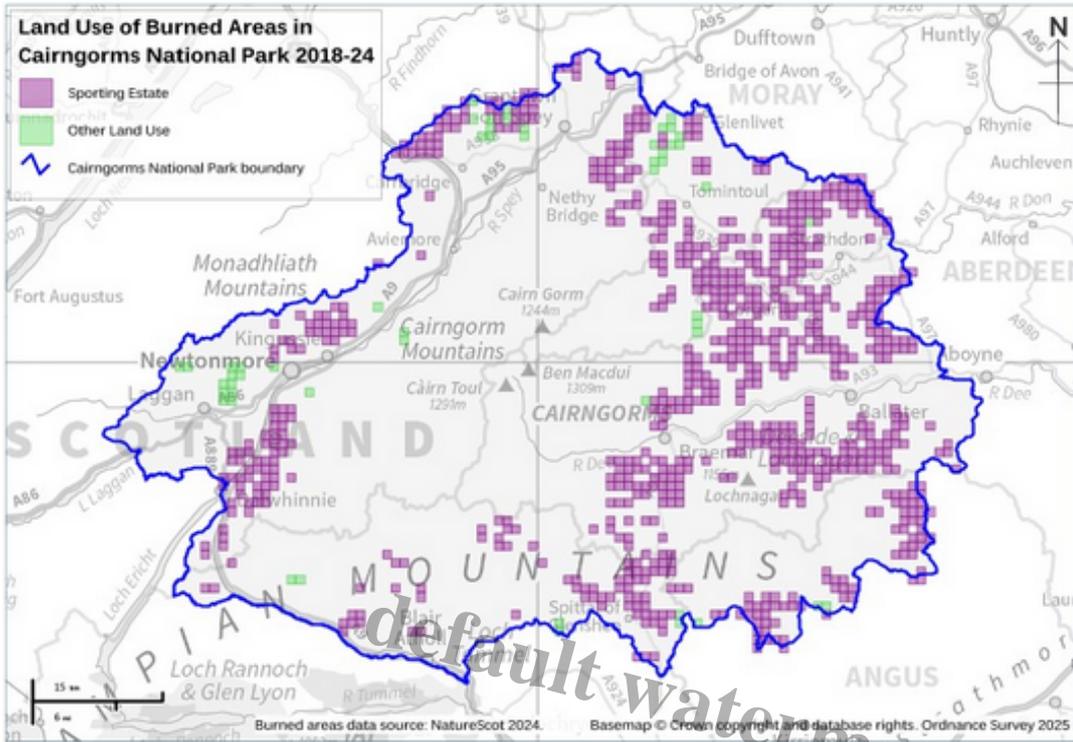
### Description



Muirburn just west of A826 between Amulree and Aberfeldy 8th April 2025 during a period of high fire risk. Photo credit author.

*[The post first appeared on Prof Douglas MacMillan's Linked-In feed. Our apologies, the original caption to this photo said it was taken from A9 at Drumochter - ed. Photo taken same day at Drumochter is now included below]*

Last week Scottish Ministers approved a ban on recreational fires and barbecues in the Cairngorms National Park between 1 April and 30 September to reduce the growing risk of wildfire. Now I have come close enough to fire (both controlled and wild) in my forestry career to know that fires are not nice - they destroy biodiversity, release carbon from the soil, kill plants and animals, pollute the air and threaten lives and property. Also, unlike other parts of the world, fire is not part of the natural ecological cycle here (as we generally don't have dry lightning). So yes, I am broadly in support of any measure to prevent wildfires, but why pick on campers when they are not the main cause of fire in the Cairngorms National Park (CNP)?



My colleague Euan Stevenson and I analysed the most recent satellite derived data from NatureScot that maps all discrete fires in CNP from late 2018 to early 2024. Almost 3000 fires are recorded, covering an area of 21 million square meters. By apportioning each 1 km square to either sporting or non-sporting ownership we found that 98% of all fires (and 92% by area) begin on sporting estate land, with the maximum number of fires in any km square a staggering 30 in only 5 years.



Photo 8th April muirburn at Drumochter from A9

Many of these deliberate muirburns are started very close to protected native woodlands, commercial forests and main roads such as the A9 so even if one of these fires gets out of control the risk of catastrophic damage is high.

Intensively burning moorland in narrow strips is considered normal practice for promoting habitat for red grouse. Although the red grouse shooting season lasts for only a few weeks, it generates significant profit to landowners and some seasonal employment. Supporters of grouse shooting argue that muirburn, because it is an important recreational activity and is carefully controlled, should not also be banned. Also, landowners say because it reduces the ‘‘fuel-load’’ in the landscape, it can prevent dangerous wild fires from developing.

However, there is little evidence to back up these claims and previous research by the National Trust for Scotland ([see here](#)) found that around 60% of all wildfires in Scotland were attributable to ‘‘muirburn gone wrong’’. Furthermore, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in their submission to the CNP last year found that 19% of fires they attended in the CNP arose from intentional muirburn, with only 13% originating from campfires.

I am not aware of any analysis the CNP Authority used to determine a ban on camp fires, but logic would surely lead us to question why the ban affects only campers and not grouse shooting? Both are important recreational activities that create seasonal jobs in the tourism sector locally.

The answer, of course, does not lie with science or economics, but in the realm of Park politics. I am guessing that campers are not an affluent, highly organised group with excellent lobbying skills and with

direct access to CNP senior management and Board!

### **Category**

1. Cairngorms

### **Tags**

1. camping
2. CNPA
3. fires
4. forestry
5. grouse moors
6. landed estates
7. muirburn

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