

## HIE's planning application for a coaster mountain coaster and track erosion at Cairn Gorm

### Description



Track erosion by the Ptarmigan, with the black line indicating the current erosion channel and the black arrows areas where the track surfacing has washed out over vegetation. Photo 2025,

A couple of weeks ago Dave Morris and myself met with Mike Gifford, the Chief Executive, and two of the new directors of Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL) at their invitation. Among the subjects we discussed were the proposed mountain coaster, which CMSL has called a toboggan run, but in fact has nothing to do with snow or snowsports. Proof of that is Landmark, down in the woods at Carrbridge, which already has water coasters is now proposing to build a similar coaster on rails to replace its timber train ([see here](#)).

CMSL helpfully clarified that the proposed access track, described in the planning documents as being for "maintenance and emergency" purposes, is in fact intended for operational purposes. Its to save staff having to walk up to the top of the coaster. They also explained the proposed line of the track, almost straight up the hill by the Day Lodge poma, was chosen to reduce the visual impact.

In theory this could make it easier for the Cairngorms National park Authority (CNPA) to approve the planning application on landscape grounds "but see below! The line, however, is far too steep for a track and is likely to erode away sooner rather than later ([see here](#)). The result will either be a bigger eyesore or the gravel surface of the track will need to be continually replaced.

Unfortunately, I don't think we persuaded CMSL of the need to get a second opinion on the Construction Environment Management Plan provided by McGowan and CNOCLEE but we were pleased at Sandra Dick's coverage of the issues in the Herald ([see here](#)).

## The erosion of vehicular tracks at Cairn Gorm



Ptarmigan access track July 2025. New granite aggregate had been spread on top of the previous eroded surface (left) to smooth it for karting but this too was eroding on the left hand side

Track erosion has been a longstanding problem at Cairn Gorm that was first documented by Adam Watson over 45 years ago. As a result of climatic factors (such as freeze thaw, precipitation, and wind), along with poor design, the materials employed and human use, the surfaces of tracks at Cairn Gorm rarely last for long as I witnessed when descending from the Ptarmigan last year.



and the right. Erosion gully on opposite side of track to photo above

The finer materials in the granite aggregate are the first to be washed out:



Partially blocked culvert. Note how the finer materials have been washed out of track above but the culvert has reduced the amount of water flowing down the track immediately below protecting the ne surface there for a little longer.

Some of these washed out materials had accumulated in the drainage ditches on the uphill side of the Ptarmigan vehicular access track:

*default watermark*



Note the different grades of material with the finest holding in the water and showing as damp patches. Photo July 2025.

On the downhill side of tracks, washout spreads material across the hillside covering vegetation. As an example of the short time this process takes, compare the washout in the top photo of this post with these from the 2022 planning application to ‘improve’ the area around the Ptarmigan ([see here](#)):



Image credit CMSL Construction Environmental Management Plan 2022

The 2016 photos shows a bare track with re-seeding of bare areas of ground on either side (the bluish areas); the 2020 photo shows vegetation recovery including a grassy strip down the middle of the track; my photo shows how in 2025 nothing remained of the grassy strip at the top of the track and how material had spread over vegetation on the downhill side.

Adam Watson’s book, ‘Human impacts on the northern Cairngorms’, (2012) describes:

*‘burial of topsoil by coarse infertile granitic grit granules due to severe water erosion leading to transport of grit downhill and its deposition on top of existing vegetation and topsoil. This was observed to occur in heavy rainstorms in all seasons, but was especially frequent and severe during rapid thaws and in autumn rainstorms’*

Poor track design increases the impact of these processes further:



Collapse of new section of kart track (which incidentally never appears to have had planning permission) July 2025 illustrating how erosive forces punish poor design



New surfacing of track at the Shieling poised to wash downhill July 2025

My understanding from our meeting with CMSL is that their staff clear the wash out from the drainage ditches and put it back on the tracks. This recycles part of the aggregate that has been eroded away but does not replace that washed over more open ground. As a consequence fresh aggregate, as shown in the two photos above, still requires to be imported from elsewhere. The environmental and financial costs must be significant.



Among the signs of erosion at the bottom of the mountain bike tracks was an incipient water channel running down the far side

After our meeting with CMSL we took a walk around the area by the Day Lodge where we took a look at the bottom of the mountain bike tracks. They, like the vehicular and the karting tracks, show clear signs of erosion.

## **A different approach is needed at Cairn Gorm**

It has taken me a long time to reach this conclusion but I now believe inclined gravel tracks are completely inappropriate for Cairn Gorm, whether for vehicles or for recreational purposes. The erosion of such tracks is both damaging to the environment and unsustainable. If a gravel track needs resurfacing a dozen times in a 50 year period it clearly either shouldn't be there or a different type of track is needed.

Paved tracks, which used to be built in the hills prior to the advent of bulldozers, would be more sustainable but far more expensive. And the paving would need to be of granite to fit the landscape making it even more expensive. Such tracks probably wouldn't be suitable for karting and would need to be designed very differently for mountain biking to the current 'family' offering in Coire

Cas.

The basic mistake that CMSL are still making is that instead of starting with the environment and using that to set parameters for all that happens at Cairn Gorm, they have started with an idea for a business venture and then are trying to impose that on the environment. That is not the way to operate in what is supposed to be a National Park.

The day after we met CMSL, the CNPA published their landscape adviser's response to the coaster proposal on their planning portal was published on their planning portal ([see here](#)). I was fearing the worst, as the CNPA had agreed the viewpoints used in the Landscape Visual Assessment for the coaster, but the response to the proposed access track was robust:

- *the viewpoints have been photographed in mixed snow and moorland conditions which reduces potential visibility of the ATV track in particular.*
- *The ATV track, the bridges and the top hut would be particularly prominent in some views. The construction period would also cause some significant effects.*
- *The ATV track would also be prone to erosion given its gradient.*
- *the scarring left by disturbed ground would take many years to revegetate given the hostile mountain environment.*

As Dave Morris was quoted as saying in the Herald article, CMSL needs to withdraw the coaster planning application and think again. If not, the CNPA needs to make a stand and use their planning powers to force HIE/CMSL to manage Cairn Gorm differently. Addressing the track erosion on the mountain would be a good place to start.

## Category

1. Cairngorms

## Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. conservation
4. HIE
5. planning
6. visitor management

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