Playing with fire? Why the ban on camp fires exacerbates wildfire risk in the Cairngorms National Park

Description

The recent wildfire in Abernethy burned over 30km2 of moorland and ancient Caledonian woodland. It was extremely difficult to control, reaching a width of almost 25km at its peak. Nearby residents had to be evacuated.

There were significant delays in responding to the fire and this proved crucial and led directly to the disaster. Eventually helicopters were deployed as fire teams on the ground became exhausted and struggled to control the front of the fire.

At the present tine it is not known why this fire started in what is quite a remote part of Abernethy. An accidental fire from a camp-fire or even arson may be to blame and we may never be told.

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In 2025 the Park Authority (CNPA) banned camp fires and barbeques from 1 April to 30 September under a Fire Management Byelaw. Campers could face a fine of Â£500 if caught.

Many people support this approach. I do not â?? because it will increase the chance of further damaging wildfires in the CNP.

I have researched the impact of â??bansâ?? on biodiversity conservation in a number of contexts: the sale of wild goose meat in Scotland, tiger poaching in Bangladesh, and the rhino horn trade in Asia. Sometimes they work, but under some circumstances they may fail, and can exacerbate the problem due to unforeseen consequences.

Sadly I am of the opinion that the fire management bye-law in the CNP falls into this category.

For one simple reason.

When a camper accidentally starts a wildfire the chances of them reporting the fire promptly are now lower than before the ban.

Why risk arrest and a Â£500 fine when you can simply walk away and keep quiet?

Given that we have a weak â??report-reactâ?? system in the CNP, this will obviously compound delays in reporting and hence make the fire much more difficult to extinguish.

The decision to ban campfires has always struck me as strange, given that the voluntary approach was working. The ban did garner much public support, but should PR be driving the Parkâ??s management policies?

Only last year a report to the CNPA revealed that the number of open fires encountered by patrol staff was small and falling: from 0.22 fires encountered per patrol in 2023 to 0.18 in 2024 and to only 0.12 most recently in 2025. (Furthermore, satellite data confirms there were no wild fires from campers in

Abernethy or Glenmore over this period).

So why ditch the educational approach to mitigating the risks of campfires and barbecues, as recommended by the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, when it was working extremely well and clearly resonated with campers? (Especially, when the main source of wildfire in the CNP is lawful muirburn â??gone wrongâ??).

The best way to prevent damaging wildfires is not through byelaws but through education and better preparedness. Glib attention-grabbing actions like the 2025 bye-law, are only likely to make the problem worse.

[This post has also been published by Dougie MacMillan on linked in and has been updated in view of the comments below]

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