

THE CAIRNGORMS CAMPAIGNER

Spring 2008

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Whither the Funicular?

This issue, we review the situation on Cairn Gorm in this article and our Cairngorm Story. For decades, the downhill ski developments on Cairn Gorm have been a source of intense conflict, frequently reaching ministerial level as well as being a significant public expense and general political embarrassment. These conflicts are normally presented as development interests versus those of other recreations, like hillwalking, or versus wildlife and environmental conservation. In fact they have largely been the result of bad development decisions or practices on the mountain, and largely avoidable. In 1981 proposals for major westward expansion of downhill ski development into the Northern Corries and Lurcher’s Gully were so incompetently conceived that they would probably have bankrupted the then Cairngorm Chairlift Company (See Cairngorms Stories this issue). A later extension of snow fences for downhill skiing into Coire an t’Sneachda were virtually unusable as they used the proven worst snowholding slopes in the northern Cairngorms.



The whole issue reflects a failure to learn lessons on mountain and tourist development from other parts of the world. The director of the USA’s Rocky Mountain National Park visited the funicular and was asked if they would construct such a thing in a protected area and bluntly said no! Why? *“There is only one thing you know for sure about any piece of technology, “ he said, “and that is it will go out of date! So we have a rule never to put in anything you are*

unlikely to take out and, looking at all that concrete in that railway’s construction, you’ll never take that out!”

When the construction of the funicular railway and associated complex of buildings was planned, there was much debate over its environmental impact, and doubts about its economic sustainability. It is that last question that is now forcing itself to the fore. With 93 fulltime or fulltime equivalent employees in 2005/06, paid at wages and salaries several thousand pounds above the average for the local tourism industry, and spinoffs helping to support many jobs in Badenoch and Strathspey, the enterprise is one of the area’s most important employers. Economists however accept part of this employment is created by displacing visitors from other areas of the Highlands and Islands, reducing employment

there. Projected visitor numbers it would attract were overoptimistic from the start. Development costs overran from £14.8 to £19.6m, especially after Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), which built and owns the funicular railway, spent £3.6m or more buying up new buildings from the operating company to give it some working capital. Well informed commentators concluded the actual input of public money far exceeds that!

The gradual decline of snowlie, mainly through climate change, was on the cards from the start of the project. It has steadily, if erratically, removed a large part of the company’s (Cairngorm Mountain Ltd) income. A major part of the downhill ski

Whither the Funicular? contd.

development facilities lie in the neighbouring Coire na Ciste where they are already largely idle. This problem has forced the company to try to convert itself much more into a summer visitor attraction. Other measures were taken to support the company at public expense and the history of rent reductions is dramatic. An article in the Economist magazine in 2004, titled "Subsidising Scottish Skiing" noted that, "HIE gets £513,000 rent a year, a lowly 2.6% return, from Cairngorm Mountain, the company that runs the railway and skiing." Certainly, HIE and the Company signed a lease in November 2001 for an annual rent of £515 300, but this was reduced to £400,000 and, when the Company ran into severe financial trouble after a few years, to £100 000 - a massive annual loss to the public purse and to revenue available to support other enterprises. It also reduced rent income from the HIE estate on Cairn Gorm to less than its running costs of £105,000, many of which stem directly or indirectly from the operation of the development.

What now is the financial situation? Despite that massive extra input of £3.6m, and rent reductions, the company's most recent accounts show that it has an accumulated trading loss of £5.6 million. According to the Economist article, it lost £1.9m in 2001-2002 alone! The £5.6m is covered by an overdraft of £1.06 million with the Bank of Scotland, secured against company assets of £540,000, which they would not fetch on sale. It is also funded by term loans from Highland Council of £1 million and of £2.5 million from the Bank of Scotland and other means. Interest is waived on these last two loans, but the Bank of Scotland loan was meant to be recoverable within 2 years. A senior accountant, assessing the accounts for the Cairngorms Campaign, concluded, *"The Company's most recent accounts show it has no significant assets and an overall deficit of £5.4 million, and that it can only continue operating through the ongoing generosity of Highland Council, HIE, Moray Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise (which are all taxpayer funded) and the Bank of Scotland, each of which is waiving interest, rent or voting rights. Without these ongoing subsidies and support, the company would be quite unable to meet its obligations, and would be heavily insolvent, and therefore forced to cease trading immediately."*

It might be tempting to blame this situation on management, but that would be wrong! The standard of management in CairnGorm Mountain Ltd, which operates the funicular railway, is now the best and most environmentally conscientious there has been. Staff/customer relations have been transformed, and a wider range of activities and packages provided for visitors, particularly families, throughout the year and economies made. The economies have included cutting the 2004 levels of staff of 85 permanent staff and 200 seasonal staff, but that reduced the predicted direct economic benefits of the development. The development of Aviemore Highland Resort has significantly increased visitor numbers to Cairn Gorm, but the resort developers say their development is not dependent on the existence of the funicular as an attraction.

The current proposal to move out of this situation is the rebirth of the centre as "Scotland's Education Centre for the Mountain Environment." This would require further investment of yet more million of pounds of public money. It has to be seriously asked, before the taxpayers get their fingers burned again, would it turn into just another financial white elephant? Such an educational resource in Scotland might be highly desirable in the right place but, as failed visitor centres in Scotland like Archaeolink demonstrate, the three key parameters for success are location, location, location! An national education centre would have to be located to meet the educational needs of Scotland's people and, more widely, those of the UK citizenry, not to solve the problems of a local tourism industry. That would be a misuse of taxpayers money. Cairn Gorm, is far from the main Scottish population centres it should serve! The considerations in siting an educational centre are different from a commercial one - cheapness and ease of accessibility are all. If it were to be sited in Badenoch and Strathspey, it would be down at Glenmore, where the Forestry Commission already has a visitor centre, not at the end of an expensive journey on a funicular railway, or a long car ride up the Cairn Gorm car park.

The proposal also raises the question - who or what body will finance such a major redevelopment, involving millions of pounds in reconstruction of buildings and other measures, to a business in this situation and which is already effectively receiving heavy subsidies in the form of interest free loans and massive rent reductions? Our own experience of fundraisers tells us no private charity will advance funding in this situation. That again leaves the taxpayer!

The recent reversal of the decision to transfer the land from HIE to the Forestry Commission is also significant as the reason given for this was HIE's expectation that it might be investing even more in the development. There are saner hands at the helm of HIE than when it first supported the funicular railway, but future decisions will require impartial judgement. HIE is legally bound to remove the funicular railway and bear the costs if the project fails. These would be huge, but that is a foreseeable scenario if matters do not improve! It is the landowner, owner of the assets, and chief financial backer. It would basically be investing in itself. Historically and prominently it has enormous political credibility hanging on the success of the development. Frankly, HIE has too much at stake and is too involved in the development to take an objective impartial decision in this situation where it has a track record of bad decisions!

It is time for ministers to intervene! As a first step, to ensure a more impartial decision making, the land should be transferred out of HIE ownership and control, either to the Forestry Commission or directly under the Scottish Government. A blame game cometh - but no clear solution!

ACTION BY THE CAMPAIGN

OBJECTIONS TO CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK LOCAL PLAN

The Local Plan deals with development within the National Park and can therefore have major implications for the environment and natural resources of the area.

This version of the plan is a late stage – the version deposited for consultation. The Campaign had commented on previous versions and has sent in a statement of its views on this version also. In commenting on this draft, the Campaign stated “We welcome the scope of natural heritage, cultural and social issues addressed by the plan and support many of the policies within it.” It then continued, “However, we feel that several of them need strengthened and also that important objections raised within our comments on the consultative plans were not addressed.”

The Campaign noted that *“While the Plan refers to the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas, and the importance of the EU Habitats Directive reflected in the protection of Natura 200 sites is recognised, there is a need to take more cognisance of other international conventions etc, particularly since, in para 2.1, the essential role of the Cairngorms in delivering national objectives is acknowledged. These include the European Landscape Convention and the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (1994). We comment where these seem most relevant.*

Other broader issues that need taken into account include Climate Change and the carbon footprint of developments.”

There are three specific issues on which the Campaign lodged formal objections. After much pressure from various bodies including the Campaign, the value of wild country has been acknowledged in both the Park Plan that deals with broader landuse and this development plan. However, the previous draft contained policies that dealt specifically with bulldozed tracks that have been the major intrusion into wild roadless areas. The Campaign objected to the omission of these policies from the new draft.

The second objection concerned the failure of the Park Authority to follow through on its policy in the previous draft in which it intended to consult on removing certain permitted development rights in the National Park with a view to seeking an Article 4 Direction to implement the proposals.

Lastly, the Campaign objected to the scale of housing development proposed within the Park – over 1600 houses of which 475 would be holiday homes. There

have been holiday homes in Scotland for many years. Some members may well own one and in some cases there are houses which would be ruins if they were not owned as holiday homes. But it is the scale of holiday home construction already taking place within the Park and envisaged in future to which the Campaign has objected.

The Plan will likely be the subject of a public inquiry at which the Campaign may have to give evidence.

DEER MANAGEMENT IN SCOTLAND

This is always a major issue in the Cairngorms. Since last newsletter, two important things have happened in deer management. The first is the consultation by The Deer Commission Scotland on its strategy for deer management and the second government proposals to merge this Commission and Scottish Natural Heritage. Deer, it should be understood, do not belong to any one person. Under Scots law they are a common property resource and landowners only possess the right to shoot them. The Campaign is represented on Scottish Environment Link’s Deer Group and supported that group’s joint response which supported the broad approach to the subject and the policy of cooperation between government agencies on this topic.

The Campaign also sent in a detailed response on its own behalf raising a whole set of detailed issues stating *“We strongly welcome the widening recognition of the importance of wild deer in the management of broader landuse issues such as biodiversity management and landscape. We feel however, that this aspect, and some of its implications, need clearer recognition and fuller exploration. In particular, there needs to be a clearer stated perspective that since red deer, over most of their current range, are the dominant large herbivore, management of them has multiple and very major effects in shaping the ecosystem and hence they should be perceived as a major “tool” for managing those ecosystems and associated ecosystem processes.”*

The Campaign drew attention to a range of other issues such as the spread of bulldozed tracks into wild roadless areas on deer forests, and the loss of such ecologically important features such as riverine forests over almost all the red deer range, the potential significance of legislation such as the Water Framework Directive for red deer management and the impacts on soils of heavy grazing by red deer.

There is now a government proposal to merge the Deer Commission with Scottish Natural Heritage and the Campaign is considering this.

ACTION BY THE CAMPAIGN contd.

MEETING OF CAIRNGORMS LIAISON GROUP

To help pool knowledge and unify approaches to issues, the Campaign arranges meetings of voluntary environmental and recreational groups with an interest in the Cairngorms. Seven organisations were represented and useful discussions on a range of topics such as the Parks Local Plan, the Park Authority's developing policy on mass outdoor access events, and the general performance of the Park Authority as a body. One important conclusion that came out of the meeting was the recognition that water in the Cairngorms needed a more focused and united approach by all.

MEETING BETWEEN CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY (CNPA) AND THE CAMPAIGN

It is important that the Campaign maintains a dialogue with the CNPA and, as part of this, the Campaign's convenor and a member of the management committee met the chairman and vicechairman of the CNPA board and a member of their staff on 21 February. The two organisations considered their respective roles, with the Campaign stating it was essentially a "critical friend" of the CNPA, supportive, but that relations would not always be smooth. Key issues raised by the Campaign and discussed were the comparative lack of protection of the core montane zone under present CNPA policies, the need for an overall recreational strategy for the Cairngorms, the threat from major housing and other large developments driven by big business, and the lack of an interface between the CNPA and the national community in what was after all a National Park and not a local park. These are issues the Campaign will continue to pursue.

FROM YOSEMITE TO YELLOWSTONE – BY IRVINE BUTTERFIELD

*A Joint Venture Between the North East Mountain Trust
and the Cairngorms Campaign*

Irvine Butterfield, the well known mountaineer and photographer, will give an illustrated lecture on the dramatic scenery of the USA's national parks on **Wednesday 16 April at 7.30pm in the United Services Club, 15 Bon Accord Square, Aberdeen.** The occasion will also see the launch of Harvey's new map of the Cairngorms. Starting beside Yellowstone's geysers, Irvine's photographic journey will encompass the sculpted rocks of Utah, Grand Canyon, Bryce and Zion, culminating amongst the hanging walls of Yosemite. Admission £3 (Members and concessions £2)

CAIRNGORMS CAMPAIGN WEBSITE

The loss of the committee member, Fred Parker, who attended to the Campaign's website, meant the website has remained dormant for a long time. Members will be glad to know that it is now being reconstructed and a newly designed, active website should be active within weeks.

MASS OUTDOOR ACCESS EVENTS – THE CAMPAIGN'S VIEW

Large scale outdoor access events – such as sponsored fundraising walks for charities have become an issue in the Cairngorms, chiefly because they are sometimes held over remote or vulnerable areas such as the high plateaux. The CNPA recently held a workshop on this issue. The Campaign was unable to send representatives on this occasion but did respond to the report of the workshop, which had been well organised and covered the important issues.

On one issue however, the holding of events using these vulnerable areas vulnerable to foot traffic, the Campaign did urge a stronger line than that suggested in the workshop report. The section on priorities gave two measures to prevent such damage. One was the development of footpaths on areas like broad, exposed ridges. The other was organisation of events so as to minimise adverse effects on the special qualities of the area and peoples' enjoyment of them.

The Campaign's committee members feel strongly that a very clear line needs to be taken on this issue. The Campaign is clear in its view that no steps should be taken to facilitate the use of areas by any such measures. It is also clear that such a measure would not solve problems of impact but probably increase them. Footpaths on such situations do not solve the problem but usually make it worse. Walkers have no need to confine their routes to them on easy ground (As per on windy ridge between Coire Cas and Coire na Ciste) and even when such footpaths arise spontaneously, or are deliberately created, windblown grit from the exposed footpath area damages downwind vegetation extensively and other damage occurs. These impacts are well documented on the Cairngorm plateaux.

The report also suggested that organisation of these events be influenced to minimise impacts. No matter what precautions are taken, foot traffic still has its impacts and, in these situations, they are largely unavoidable.

The Campaign's response emphasized these points.

Book Reviews

Basil M.S. Dunlop: *CAIRNGORM STONES, the Natural and Cultural History of Cairngorm Gemstones*, published by Grantown Museum & Heritage Trust, £4.00

To many people Cairngorm Stones are the amber coloured gemstones which decorate upmarket sgean dubhs and Celtic broaches. As this book explains, however, such an understanding fails to recognise the full range of semi-precious stones to be found within the granite areas of the Cairngorms. In addition to Cairngorms, which are a form of quartz, there is also beryl and topaz. Dunlop briefly sets out the geology of granite formation before going on to explain at greater length the process of crystal formation within the granite.

The longest section of the book deals with the identification and subsequent exploitation of these minerals. Written records go back to the 16th century, but most of the classification work was carried out during the 18th century. During the 19th century the influx of tourists, not least to “Royal” Deeside, provided a market which the natives of Deeside and Speyside sought to supply, either directly or by selling to local gem cutters. Searching for gemstones does not appear to have been a full-time occupation, but rather a profitable sideline for shepherds and stalkers.

That part devoted to search techniques is disappointing in as much as it suggests that all the most likely locations have been exploited. Where there is movement because of weathering or erosion, however, gemstone still come to the surface and so it is still worth keeping ones eyes open.

The book has twenty-four colour illustrations and a short bibliography. It is aimed at the general reader and provides an interesting account of yet another aspect of the Cairngorm Mountains. Copies are available from Grantown Museum, Burnfield Avenue, Grantown on Spey, PH26 3HH, price £4.00 plus 60p P&P.

Iain A. Robertson

A STRONG COHERENT VOICE – Reflections on the First Twenty Years by Michael Scott OBE
30pp Pub Scottish Environment Link

For those interested in the growth and activity of environmental movements and the influence of the Cairngorms on this in the Scottish situation, this publication may make interesting reading. It is the story of the development of the liaison body (Now Scottish Environment Link) of voluntary environmental and outdoor recreational organisations in Scotland. It grew in considerable measure out of cooperation between such bodies on Cairngorms issues – especially the battle to stop expansion of downhill skiing into the Northern Corries of the Cairngorms (See Cairngorm Stories this issue). It is a story of people and very diverse organisations like the National Trust for Scotland, Friends of the Earth Scotland and the RSPB successfully pooling their knowledge, skills and commitment to learn, work together and achieve greater influence.

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Talking Points

Damage by Vehicular T



On even ground ATVs and Landrovers start to create multiple tracks that run for miles and collectively create extensive damage, as here on Morven between Deeside and Donside. The vegetation and the thin organic soils are destroyed, exposing the underlying mineral soils to erosion. Often, such deteriorating unengineered tracks eventually become difficult to drive over and require “upgrading” – usually by bulldozer!

Multiple tracks created by running vehicles over vegetation and exposing vulnerable soils, collectively doing extensive damage.



On even gentle slopes erosion expands the damaged areas, eventually joining the eroded wheel ruts into bare strips of ground up to 12m across or even more.



The National Trust for Scotland has removed tracks on its Mar Lodge Estate, and at high altitudes takes years, as shown here, to heal the high on the shoulder of Bein Abhainn.

Talking Points

Tracks in the Cairngorms

ing ATVs over even terrain, destroying
able organic soils may run for miles
nage.



has removed many km of bulldozed
but soil and plant restoration at high
here on the line of the restored track
thuid



Often, drainage of tracks is poor and, on slopes where the mineral soils are exposed, the fine material is often eroded out, leaving a bed of stones and boulders that becomes increasingly difficult to drive over. Machinery is then brought in to remove this and provide an even surface. Here, in the eastern Cairngorms, the stones can be seen just piled at the side and the collective impacts on landscape are obvious. The whole erosion and stone clearing process then begins again and some tracks have now been treated in this way several times and are sunk below the surrounding area with high embankments of stones along each side



Poor construction of tracks without adequate drainage leads to serious erosion, Here, in a bulldozed track near Clach na Ben erosion has removed both sides of the track that would support vehicle wheels to a depth of about 30cm, leaving a narrow strip high in the middle.

Talking Points contd.

Bulldozed Tracks in the Cairngorms

Bulldozed tracks intruding into wild roadless areas have been a source of almost unending conflict in the Cairngorms for almost half a century. Built almost entirely for access for recreational hunting for red deer and grouse, few issues have had such a track record of ineffectual government action. Dr Adam Watson did a survey of vehicular hill tracks in Northeast Scotland in the Journal of Environmental Management in 1984. It records that bulldozing of tracks really began around 1958, rising to a peak in the mid `1970s – but it has continued ever since, despite various planning controls. The area covered was largely the Cairngorms and it was estimated that, since a 1973 survey, there had been 1151km of new tracks built. Of these, half had been bulldozed on completely new lines, 9% on old footpath lines, and 30% were simply wheeltracks developing on open land. The main driving force, the paper stated, was a change in the kind of shooter from the old style client who would regularly walk 20-25km a day for their sport and rent a estate for weeks or even years, to one who wanted driven to grouse butts etc and was there for a only a day or a week, during which he expected to bag his grouse or deer. These tracks had other advantages such as making it easier to take dead deer off the hill without using ponies. The paper also recorded the resulting massive loss of wild land remote from any road.

To pick out a few points in the history of “control”, the General Development Order of 1950 exempted tracks built for agriculture or forestry from planning control. Some planning authorities however then classified carrying shot deer of the hill as agricultural and tracks constructed for this purpose did not need planning permission. In 1980, Circular No 20 from the then Scottish Development Department made clear planning permission was required for all tracks above 300m in National Scenic Areas. The construction of bulldozed tracks in such areas continued. The late Lord Dulverton bulldozed a track up Glen Feshie and later claimed he was unaware it needed planning permission, although both the Scottish Mountaineering Club and the Northeast Mountain Trust had previously written to him pointing out this was a requirement. Highland Regional Council

simply suggested he apply for retrospective planning permission and gave him it. Mar estate bulldozed two tracks up Glen Ey and factors similarly pled ignorance of the law and three tracks on Rothiemurchus estate were “upgraded” with bulldozers and this evaded planning control.

In 1987, under Circular 9/1987 from the Scottish Development Department, all track construction in National Scenic Areas, barring those within approved afforestation schemes, required planning permission. In the twenty years since then, the problem has continued. Tracks are still being bulldozed into roadless areas with out planning permission and conflicts have continued.

A further extension in the problem has come with the development of All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) being used widely on sensitive areas including vulnerable organic soils and plant life on highlevel terrain. These frequently gradually erode into larger and more permanent tracks that require “upgrading” – by a bulldozer of course.

Aberdeenshire Council, which is the planning authority for much of the southern Cairngorms, evolved a policy that exerted stronger planning control over the problem. With the advent of the Cairngorms National Park hopes rose of an effective approach, but only after strong pressure from various bodies including the Campaign was wild country taken into account in the final draft with a wording on roads and tracks that was weak to the point of being ineffectual. The first draft of the Local Plan however contained specific policies on bulldozed tracks, but these were deleted from the later draft, causing the Campaign and other organisations to lodge an objection to the omission!

The North East Mountain Trust (NEMT) has now mounted a project to map all such tracks in the Cairngorms and the Campaign is supporting it. For this reason, we have included an NEMT leaflet within each newsletter this time.

Quick Quote

***England, thy beauties are tame and domestic
To one who has roamed over mountains afar
Oh! for the crags that are wild and majestic,
The steep frowning glories of dark Lochnagar.***

From a song by Lord Byron, born and brought up till ten years old near Lochnagar. He never forgot his Scottish roots and Lochnagar remained his favourite mountain.

IN BRIEF

Project Ptarmigan a Success

The British Trust for Ornithology launched a project to see if hillwalkers and mountaineers would volunteer to assess ptarmigan distribution and whether the results would compare in scientific value with assessments by scientists. The Trust now reports the project a success as, in 2002, volunteers walked 614 "transect routes" covering 3.212km above 750 metres, and recorded 1,027 ptarmigan and other useful data. These numbers apparently accord with those gathered by professionals. Volunteers also gathered and sent in samples of feathers from 222 sites which might now be analysed genetically to see if there is one large Scottish population or if it is fragmented between several isolated sub-populations.

Culling of Deer in Caenlochan National Nature Reserve

Members may well be aware of the strong conflicts between landowners and environmental interests on the impacts of excessive red deer numbers on the highly protected plantlife of this area. As mentioned in a previous newsletter, the scale of over population by red deer was illustrated on the website of the Deer Commission for Scotland by aerial photographs of a herd of 1200 stags on the move in the areas. The Commission developed a joint action programme with Scottish Natural Heritage to bring protected sites in the Scottish uplands into good condition through culling of red deer where excessive populations were a problem on many of these sites. An agreement was reached to cull 8,000 red deer from ten estates in the area – a size of cull that illustrates the scale of the problem. Four thousand deer per year were to be culled for two years. The Campaign has kept an eye on this programme and the Commission has informed us that the cull has been almost successfully completed, with a final cull of 2000 to be achieved this year. Cull figures suggest a further 400 or so deer have still to be culled, but counts just completed will assess the situation. Earlier this year, Campaign members visited the Caenlochan (See previous newsletter) and noted the sizeable number of sheep that were still there. These move over from the south, from tenant farms on Invercauld Estate, and sheep can be as destructive as deer – more so. The Commission and Scottish Natural Heritage are now considering this issue.

Talks at the AGM

The AGM in September of last year heard three interesting talks by speakers expert on their subject. Two of them were open to the public and were followed by lively discussion. Andrew Forsyth, Executive Director of Friends of the Lake District gave a valuable talk on developing and running an organisation rather like the Campaign and much of what was learned has been incorporated into the our Development Plan, which is now being used as the basis for a Business Plan. John Milne, Chairman of the Deer Commission for Scotland described the Commission's strategy for deer management in Scotland and, lastly, David Dick gave an illustrated talk on illegal poisoning and other persecution of protected

species. This last talk has now caused discussion within the committee on how members can be involved in helping prevent this criminal activity and action will follow.

Partridges and Muirburn on Invercauld Estate

Invercauld Estate is a large landholding of over 100,000 acres stretching from the summit of Beinn Avon south through Braemar to well beyond the Spital of Glenshee. It has been the site of a range of problems such as heavy grazing by red deer on the Caenlochan area, and bulldozed tracks in other areas. Two more problems have arisen in recent times. About 16,000, artificially raised red legged partridges were purchased and released onto the estate in two sites for shooting. They could be seen by the dozen, wandering around, semi-tame and not very predator savvy. The local foxes must have thought Christmas had come early! At one site where about 8,000 were released, they took to roosting on the nearby Creag Leek cliffs – presumably for safety! Unfortunately Creag Leek is an SSSI and the combine droppings of so many birds have the same impact as a good dose of fertiliser! Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) intervened. There were threats of prosecution, but eventually the estate has assured SNH it won't do it again!

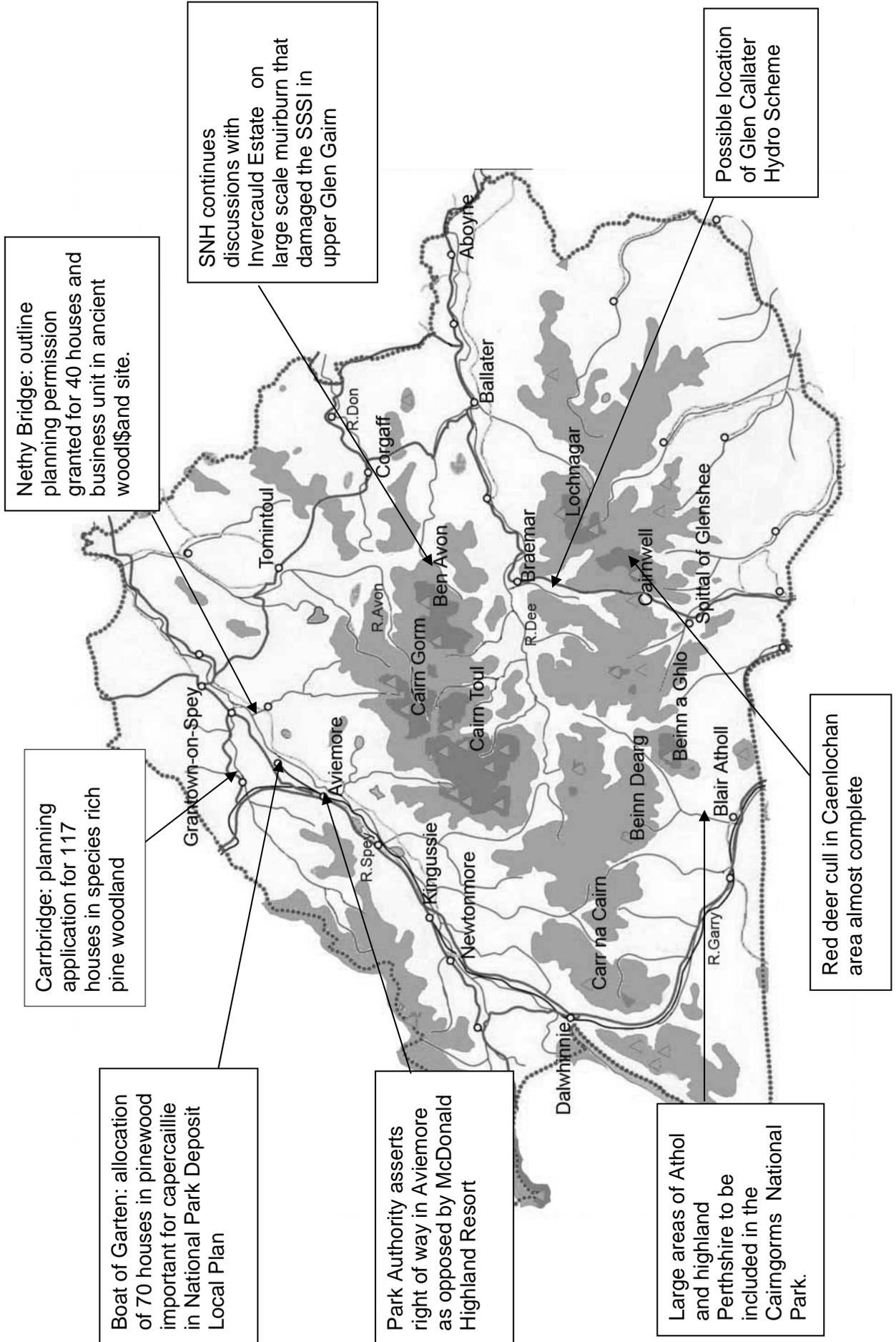
The other issue is really much more serious. Upper Glen Gairn has always been a quiet, remote area. A significant part of it is within an SSSI designated for its value as heather moorland. Recent visitors were dismayed to see that huge fires had been lit along the base of hills on either side and simply left to burn uphill into sensitive soils and habitats – even as far as the plateau! From any point of view this was a destructive act, damaging to the interests of the landowner and the values of the SSSI alike and, after surveying the area, SNH have advised the SSSI has been sufficiently damaged for it to be declared in an unfavourable condition! We are informed that the burning was done by the estate keeper to restore areas covered by old heather as grouse moor. Somebody needs some basic education about their job! Discussions between SNH and the estate staff on how to manage the area in future continue.

Pollution! Pollution!

Pollution – there is no escaping it and its not new. Roman silver mining was so extensive and prolonged that lead pollution from it can be detected globally and turned up in studies in Scottish lochs in Galloway. Even the pure mountain waters carry their load, as known by readers of that recent text "Lochnagar – The Natural History of a Mountain Lake" edited by Dr Neil Rose of University College London – and a mere £78.99 on Amazon! Research has accumulated many years of data on the pollutants on even such isolated lochans as those on Lochnagar (For reasons unclear the name of the main lochan transferred itself to the mountain many years ago). There are a lot of pollutants there including heavy metals like lead, mercury, and cadmium, plus organic pollutants

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AROUND THE CAIRNGORMS



IN BRIEF contd.

such as PCBs, pesticides, and flame retardants! The fish in the lochan have absorbed a good spectrum of pollutants. In one study of pollutants in such mountain "lakes" across the European Union from Norway to the eastern Alps, Lochnagar came out "tops" for

concentrations of some pollutants. How did they get there – by atmospheric pollution. "Yes – that's it, your breathing the damn things in! Still, don't let it put you off – the water is still as good to drink as you'll get in the great outdoors.

BREAKING NEWS

Snaring to be Continued – In our last newsletter, we informed members that the Campaign had opposed the continued use of snares as a form of culling for various reasons including the cruelty often involved and killing of nontarget species caught in them. The Minister for Environment in Scotland, Michael Russell has announced the practise will continue, but with a package of measures intended to prevent misuse of snares, stating *"The package that we intend to bring forward will I believe make a significant difference in terms of animal welfare. By implementing this package Scotland will have established the best possible practice in terms of animal welfare whilst allowing effective land management to continue with all the economic and conservation benefits that accrue. We will also be sending a clear signal to those wildlife cowboys and criminals who use snares illegally and indiscriminately that their methods will be vigorously pursued and punished."* The measures include the tagging of snares with ID tags to identify who set them, and making it illegal to set snares in situations and ways where they might cause undue suffering. Progress – but not enough!

Scottish National Parks – Much has been happening on this front. Professor Neil Kay, Professor of Business Economics at Strathclyde University, published a Review of Environmental Governance for the government and was highly critical of their governance structure recommending a "root and branch review" of their status as governmental organisations as soon as possible and stating, *"But leaving them as the clunky, cumbersome, formal and bureaucratic muddle that these Park Authority NDPBs have become would do no-one any favours, particularly the public interest they are supposed to service."* It is not a very convincing report. However at a debate on Scotland's National Parks on 13 March 08, the minister stated *"The Parks have made good progress since they were established. Nevertheless, we are committed to simpler, more effective government and need to ask ourselves if we have the right model for running the Parks and what alternatives there might be. The review will look at the organisation and running of the National Parks, as well as more detailed matters such as planning powers. It will also look at whether there is a need for boundary changes."* He also announced that the southern boundary of Cairngorms National Park is to be extended to include Blair Athol and parts of eastern and Highland Perthshire – a measure the Campaign has supported. The National Park review will be done in two stages. The first stage will examine organisational issues and will begin in May. The second stage will begin in the autumn will deal with more detailed operational matters and will also consider possible criteria for any future National Park designation.

QUICK QUOTE

"First and foremost, National Parks should be about local people. I am a passionate supporter of community-led initiatives and, - - - -"

-Mr Michael Russel MSP, Minister for the Environment.

Oh really? Whatever happened to the national community in whose name the parks were declared?

CAIRNGORM STORIES

The Battle of Lurcher's Gully

"Skiing loses corrie battle" headlined the "Down Memory Lane" section of the lively local newspaper of Badenoch and Strathspey last December, 2007. It was a reminder that it was a quarter of a century since the then Secretary of State for Scotland decided against major westward expansion of downhill skiing development from Coire Cas, west into the "Northern Corries" (Corrie an t'Sneachda, Coire an Lochan) to Lurcher's Gully. The decision made much of the high recreational, scenic and scientific value of the area and the damage the development would cause to these. However, the truth was that the whole proposal was, frankly, incompetent – so badly conceived in fact that, as staff of the then Cairngorms Chairlift Company later admitted, it would have bankrupted the company if it had gone ahead. What was so wildly wrong with it was examined at a Public Inquiry in 1981 in Kingussie.

The scheme aimed to double the capacity of ski development, by developing tows in the Northern Corries and chairlift facilities in Lurcher's Gully. All would be connected by a road from Coire Cas across the mouths of the corries to the foot of the Lurchers Gully. The advantages, the developers claimed, would focus ski development in Scotland at one site where the wide diversity of runs and supporting facilities would provide a high quality resort and, by doubling the size of the ski development, half the size of queues at times of peak demand.

Ski development on Cairn Gorm had not exactly been brilliantly designed. On a visit to examine Coire Cas in 1981, Dr Friz Schwarzenbach, the world's foremost researcher on design of ski developments and a consultant in demand from the Himalayas to the Andes, reckoned this was about the fivehundredth ski development he had examined. "There are many mistakes you can make in ski development," he intoned on site, "but this is the first one where they have made all of them!" – this said while gazing at what he deemed to be then possibly the world's worst designed ski development. In his evidence to the Inquiry he explained how the consequent overcrowding of pistes would increase injury rates. Research showed, he pointed out,

that doubling the size of a ski development did not half the size of queues at peak times but quadrupled them because the oscillations between high and low demand continued and in fact increased exponentially.

He judged the Northern Corries quite unsuitable for downhill ski development. No less than four sets of data on snowlie presented by objectors supported this including photographic evidence going back 20 years, and a three year study of snow lie in the Cairngorms. The developer had collected no information on snowlie.

It got worse! Independent study of the proposed road to Lurcher's Gully showed the route had been inadequately surveyed, its public safety aspects overlooked, and the overall costs of building it greatly underestimated. Further, use of it would lead to increased traffic on the main Coire

na Ciste Road, which was already at capacity with traffic, necessitating a further £1m expenditure on widening it.

Considering the chairlift company at that time made profits of just £200,000 a year, had an overdraft of £330,000 and had run out of money to complete a £1.25m daylodge, embarking on a £3m-£4m development of this kind seemed improvident to



Northern corries from across Loch Morlich

say the least!

The whole debacle demonstrated a consistent theme about the many conflicts on Cairn Gorm. They are envisaged as being caused by collisions between development and conservation. In fact what has often fuelled them has been the hype and incompetence with which badly planned or executed developments have been pursued!

Nonetheless, the "Lurcher's Gully Battle", as it had been headlined, was a turning point in environmental issues in Scotland. It proved to government that the environmental movement could no longer be ignored. Also, the then chairman of the Northeast Mountain Trust wrote to the environmental and recreational voluntary groups who had cooperated on the issue that this cooperation should be put on a regular basis. The result, was the organisation that grew into Scottish Environment Link which has just published a history of its first 20 years. This can be viewed at www.scotlink.org, Go to Home Page, then Link Information and then Publications.