



Campaigning for the Conservation of Wild Land in Scotland

Publisher of Scottish Wild Land News

Beryl Leatherland
Convenor

The Cairngorm National Park Authority
Planning Support Team
14 The Square
Grantown- on Spey
PH 26 3HG

29th March 2018

Dear Sir

Planning Application 2018/0112/DET: Installation of beginner and intermediate artificial ski slopes with associated services.

On behalf of our members, I am writing to OBJECT to the above development proposal. Our grounds for objection are concern over landscape impacts, the potential for damage to natural features, the lack of confidence that a quality development will result and concern over the appropriateness of the proposal and its justification in this location. In addition there has been inadequate consultation.

I note that the application has been called in by the Cairngorm National Park Authority, and that it was originally an application made to The Highland Council with planning reference 18/01180/FUL. The reasons for the call in procedure are given as “the proposal will make a significant addition to an important visitor attraction in a sensitive location and is considered to raise issues of significance to the collective aims of the National Park”.

In considering the proposal I have reflected on the recent history of the activities of the Applicant in the ski area. It has to be said that these do not inspire confidence or trust in the company and its contractors to deliver a project or significant change to the necessary high standard required or to do that appropriately.

Visual Impact

The proposal will have a significant adverse impact on the landscape of the corrie and be visible for some distance away. The ski facility at Hillend in Edinburgh can be seen from 25 kilometres away to the north over a wide arc of populated areas, especially when illuminated, and this one would be expected to be similarly dominant in the landscape of the area. This would be inappropriate in a National Park. The visualisations in the application documents show a very unsightly facility and the dark green blocks of matting will look very unnatural on the typical Cairngorm terrain.

Inappropriateness of the proposal

The specified location is most unsuitable for a beginner or intermediate facility of this nature. The site is exposed, particularly to westerlies and adverse weather, this will be a deterrent for beginners and children in particular. The facility would best be located down at Glenmore or in Aviemore



itself, where more infrastructure is to hand and the location would be more convenient for lessons. It is unrealistic to expect people to travel up the hill for a lesson of a couple of hours or less, especially if the weather is poor. There are ski slope facilities in many urban and more central parts of Scotland and it would not be practical for visitors to travel to Cairngorm for lessons when they could achieve the same outcomes nearer home with the associated time and travel cost savings. This proposal is not large enough or sufficiently varied in its features to offer a facility with much scope for skill development, particularly for boarders, so these two points will also limit its usefulness.

Justification

Such a facility however, with its associated uplift infrastructure could be expected to feed into the lift facilities on the hillside above it and thus be available for skiers when the funicular tunnel is blocked as it so often is during the winter. Is this proposal thus a means to an end, with the eventual aim of using it to get customers up the hill and thereby compensating for the frequent unavailability of the funicular?

Relevant Policies and Legislation

I have re-read the Cairngorm National Park Partnership Plan 2017-2022. This provides the strategic context for managing the park as a sustainable tourist destination, coupled with obligations and ambitions relating to conserving and enhancing natural features. The relevant Priorities in this context are Priority 4 Visitor infrastructure and information, Priority 5 Active Cairngorms and Priority 6 Learning and Inclusion. The application documents do not reflect the aims of the Partnership Plan and its priorities, and there is no evidence that they have been taken into account at all.

The National Parks [Scotland] Act 2000 has 4 aims and in fact the proposal could be considered to undermine the first of these which is “to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area”. In Section 9.6 of the Act it is stated that the greatest weight in decision making must be given to this first aim, which this proposal doesn’t address at all.

Planning process

The application documents are inadequate and there is no EIA. The latter is required for proposals in locations where there are designated sites that come under the European Birds and Habitats Directives. Also it seems that there has been no pre-application consultation carried out which would be thought to be essential. The environmental documents on species etc are very meagre, with no supporting data or evidence. There will undoubtedly be adverse landscape impacts and yet no mitigation strategies are proposed [the green matting would not achieve any mitigation].

Comment on the Full Supporting Statement

Presumably Cairngorm Mountain Ltd had assessed the viability of the business before they took it on, and should therefore have been expected to be aware of the seasonality of snow cover and the challenges posed by poor snow records, declining length of the season, the likelihood that these trends would continue and the often difficult weather conditions in this location. This document however seems to suggest that they only realised these factors once they were in operation.

Business Impact/Model

Similarly, the visitor numbers and the range of activities at the site were known when the company took the business on. Since then, rather than investment and improvement, the facilities and management have not improved, in fact the buildings at the centre have been allowed to deteriorate and indeed management standards have seemed to decline to such an extent that those like me who have visited the area for decades all year round are disappointed to see its decline under the present management. The existing retail and food and beverage facilities are of poor quality, particularly the restaurants which are very unappealing.

Why should the real risk be taken that Cairngorm could be further degraded by a company that has in effect, made a poor business decision? This proposal is obviously unlikely to turn fortunes around. There have been problems with previous applications for work on the site, which apparently entailed unagreed works being undertaken by this company's contractors. Hence there is little confidence that a quality tourist and visitor facility will be delivered to an agreed specification and with compliance with any conditions set.

What is required is an overall plan for recreation and visitor experience, on a year round basis, to be devised and properly consulted upon with all stakeholders. Various options have been considered such as mountain biking trails, and a zip wire course but decided against. The existing Day Lodge is now inadequate so it would seem to be a false economy to increase activities on site without making a comparable improvement to the indoor offering. I very much agree that the long term certainty of employment and retention of experienced staff is a priority, but there are summer activities that could be developed to enable the season to be extended, using the natural assets of the location. This is the case in Alpine resorts which operate year round very effectively. These could include guided and instructional hillwalking and mountaineering courses, educational offerings on geology, flora and fauna and photography courses to mention just a few possibilities.

To support the ski area, Aviemore needs additional facilities such as a good leisure centre, a swimming pool and a climbing wall, in order to increase indoor and bad weather activity alternatives and attract more visitors and repeat visitors as well as providing good facilities for permanent residents to make it an attractive place to live and work. Many local people would be able to be employed both in the village and on the hill, using enlightened employment strategies.

Should you wish to query any of the above, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully

Beryl Leatherland

