

THE CAIRNGORMS CAMPAIGNER

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CAIRNGORMS –THE BRAND

"Aviemore and the Cairngorms – Scotland's Natural Adventure" are being relentlessly promoted. Large adverts appear in daily papers. Brochures promising the holiday of a lifetime fall out of Sunday papers. "An unbeatable landscape" raves one heading. "Untamed mountain landscape, fast flowing rivers, rare birds and mammals – have you discovered Scotland's great wild places yet?" Some headlines are curious. "Play areas, swimming pools, steam railways and a theme park – this is one break in the great outdoors that the children will treasure forever" Play areas? Steam railways? The great outdoors?

Partly, this is related to the launch, on 6 September this year of the Aviemore and Cairngorms Destination Management Organisation (DMO) to help market the area, chiefly Badenoch and Strathspey. With a budget of £450,000, half from the taxpayer, it aims to increase tourism in the area. It is supported by 50 local businesses and 14 community councils.

If you "Google" the word "Cairngorms" you get 483,000 hits - many of them commercial websites. "Cairngorms National Park" scores 269,000 The Cairngorms and the National Park are becoming commodities to be marketed like any others. Nothing wrong with that, except when it is overdone – and tourism development, the world over, nearly always does overdo it, damaging the resources of landscape and wildlife etc on which it is based. In the process it does more economic and social damage to the local community than the economic returns justify. There is growing evidence that this is happening in Badenoch and Strathspey. Large scale house building, often of holiday homes, is putting pressure on local semi-ancient woodlands, and yet still local people cannot afford to buy a home there. The water demand created will soon outstrip current local supplies, and the search for greater supplies may well

lead to conflict with environmental protection.

As an example of the trend, the Campaign recently acted on a clear case of destructive marketing, when a member drew its attention to the fact that Aviemore Highland Resort was offering a one hour trip in a helicopter around the Cairngorms to "explore the majestic beauty of the Cairngorms and the



The CNPA has spent £1,000,000 creating and siting stone entry signs at the National Park Boundaries using Balmoral granite. The Park's symbol, the Osprey, is on the sign. It is perhaps the best example of commercialised wildlife in the Park. The Park Authorities have opposed the erection of signs saying "Gateway to the Cairngorms" at Blair Atholl, which is outwith the Park, on the grounds it might confuse the Cairngorms brand.

CAIRNGORMS –THE BRANDcontd.

surrounding area from the air." This caused us to write to the resort manager.

On Aviemore and Highland Resort's website it says (Hype is the besetting sin of the tourist industry)

"Although perhaps most famous for 'Operation Osprey' which helped re-establish Ospreys in Scotland, this area of Scotland's reputation for natural heritage conservation is almost unrivalled in the UK. A little patience, a little luck and a lot of peace and quiet will reward even the most inexperienced wildlife watcher with glimpses of the rare, lovely or just downright cute. From otters, badgers, pine martens and Scottish wildcat to vast herds of red deer, all of Britain's grouse species, the protected red squirrel, eagles, falcons, buzzards and, of course, osprey. Bring binoculars, be prepared to wait - the soft air and gentle silence makes time slip by unnoticed - and you won't be disappointed."

"One can only say that your customers will be disappointed in their attempts to observe wildlife if there are hired helicopters flying around, and there won't be much "peace and quiet" for your customers either, nor indeed for the customers of other tourism businesses in the area," we opined in our letter! This at least extracted an assurance that the helicopter trip was a one-off.

Globally, over exploitation by tourism is a major problem. "World beauty spots may limit visits" said a headline in the Scotsman newspaper of 22 September, referring to a report by the Centre for Future Studies.

According to the Scotsman's account, *"Famous attractions around the world including the Great Barrier Reef and the Florida Everglades could have limits imposed on visits from tourists by 2020 to prevent them being destroyed forever, a report predicted yesterday. The ravages of climate change and mass tourism could mean many must-see destinations are denied to thousands of travellers each year."* Of course, in some of the USA's national parks, this already happens through a system of entry permits. Catherine Pearce, of Friends of the Earth, is then quoted warning that without a radical change in lifestyles erosion of beautiful sites would continue. *"If we continue to travel and fly around the world to our hearts' desire, the levels of carbon this will pump into the atmosphere will mean that eventually there will be nothing left of the world to appreciate - never mind keep safe behind fences."*

Hmm! Much to think about! It is part of the function of a National Park to protect against such overexploitation, but there are strong doubts as to whether the National Park Authority has the powers or strength of will to do so in the Cairngorms. As long ago as 1980, a three-year full time study of tourist development in Badenoch and Strathspey concluded that the area had already reached the point where the ecological and social damage now outweighed the economic gains. By then, housing for local people was already a problem. In areas of intensive tourist development, one of the first effects is that local people find they can no longer afford to live in their own community. However, large companies whose decisions are guided more by the interests of distant shareholders rather than local residents now drive much of the pressure for development. Loss of local control by communities over their development is another global feature of intensive tourism development.

Many years of research into such social and ecological impacts of tourism development have provided important lessons. The Park Authority has published a Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the Campaign has vigorously pointed out that it does not take heed of this research and lessons. The Authority has now published a policy to tackle the problem of lack of housing for local people focusing on residency criteria for those wishing to buy a house within the National Park. Inevitably it has run into controversy and opposition, especially from developers and landowners, and it is being "adjusted". However, the housing problem cannot really be separated from the strong pressures for tourism development that at least partially create it. Both have major implications for the Cairngorm's environment.

CORRECTION

In our last newsletter we stated Keith Miller joined the management committee as a John Muir Trust representative. In fact, he serves in an individual capacity.

ACTION BY THE CAMPAIGN

TRANSFER OF HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS ENTERPRISE'S CAIRN GORM ESTATE TO THE FORESTRY COMMISSION

Negotiations for this transfer have continued and the CC responded to a recent consultation on the proposals by the Forestry Commission (FC). The CC supported the land transfer, chiefly because it would permit a unified management system from the summit of Cairn Gorm to the western end of Loch Morlich – in short restoring the old boundaries of the Glenmore National Forest Park. However, the Campaign opposed aspects of the structure of management proposed by the FC. This proposed a separate management group for the upper areas separate from the management structure in the lower part of the Forest Park. This mitigated against unified management of the Forest Park. Secondly, the FC proposed a “management executive” consisting of itself and Cairngorm Mountain Ltd, which would be FC’s tenant by then, with other bodies such as SNH and the Cairngorms National Park Authority taking part in meetings by invitation. The CC asserted that FC, as landowner holding ultimate responsibility, could not dispense with executive authority to tenants, and that the agencies mentioned had major statutory interests in the area and would inevitably decide for themselves if management issues concerned them. The CC supported proposals for FC to have a wider stakeholder group who would participate in the management of the area and noted it was listed as one such stakeholder by the FC.

GLENMORE FOREST DESIGN PLAN

This plan was received from the FC, which invited comment by the CC. The Campaign pointed to some gaps in the FC’s evaluation of the Forest Park area and also made some suggestions for improvement of the plan. Among these was the suggestion to diversify the plantings along the margins of the road from Aviemore. Tree cover at present is rather monotonous. Nearly all people visiting the area approach along it by this route, and the quality of this “journey to play” is a significant part of the day for visitors. The FC has accepted this recommendation and intends to act upon it. The CC also recommended the removal of the remaining Norway Spruce in the area as a non-native species that is not appropriate in the Park as seed from it invades pine forest and the open hill areas of the Park even at high altitudes on the Kincardine hills within the Park.

SCOTTISH FORESTRY STRATEGY REVIEW 2006

The Campaign responded to a consultation on this strategy and made some basic points. It welcomed the recognition of the reality and seriousness of Climate Change and that forestry “can make a substantial role in tackling it.” The impact of climate change lends a very powerful impetus to arguments for native woodland restoration by reductions in grazing. It also welcomed the increased recognition of the importance of ancient woodland sites and the program for removing non-native trees from plantations on ancient woodland sites but felt that measures for preventing further loss or damage to ancient woodland sites still appear inadequate.

The Campaign pointed to the lack of recognition that most commercial conifers are themselves invasive non-native species. They can now be seen spreading onto land surrounding plantations, whether that is native woodland, hillsides, roadsides or other land, and that this has consequences including deleterious impacts on biodiversity and landscape. This needs addressed.

The draft strategy stated “Forestry is not about trees, it is about people. And it is about trees only in so far as trees can serve the needs of people.” The Campaign responded, “Is not the natural world to be allowed even a scintilla of intrinsic importance? And if not what hope is there for its future, dominated by a species that refuses to grant importance to anything but its own selfish wants?”

THE CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL NATURE RESERVES

DO CHANGES ADOPTED BY SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE LEAVE A HOLE IN CONSERVATION PROTECTION?

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has announced its proposals for changes in both the scale and functions of its National Nature Reserves (NNRs) in Scotland.

The Cairngorms NNR, was declared in 1954 by the then Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) of Scotland. At about 38,000 acres/15,350 hectares, it has always been by far the largest of them. It has had a very mixed history with often deeply confused objectives from the start. Its stated objective was, *“for the purpose of conserving its native woodlands and mountain habitats with their characteristic plants and animals, so that these may persist and develop naturally with a minimum of interference from man’s activities but nevertheless subject to scientific management based on observation, experience and experiment.”* What was embedded within that statement was the emphasis of natural evolutionary development of the ecosystem. However, the NCC’s press handout on the occasion stated, *“The reserve is intended to preserve **as nearly as possible unchanged** this grand stretch of country and its highly interesting wildlife and vegetation for the enjoyment of the present and future generations and for scientific study.”* (our emphasis) There was a clear collision between preserving things in an unchanged state and restoring the processes of natural evolution, especially given the advanced state of degeneration of the native pinewoods and the pressing need to permit their regeneration. This wasn’t simply a confusion of words. Up till 1974, even those parts of the Cairngorms NNR within the ownership of NCC were simply run like highland sporting estates and not till that policy was reversed and red deer culled did the pine forest in those areas start to regenerate. By 1976, the evolutionary development theme had reasserted itself and the new management plan stated, *“---the creation of a specific ecosystem or assemblage of plants and animals is not the objective of management; instead it is the maintenance of near natural evolutionary processes in the environment of the Cairngorms.”*

SNH believes that the long history of other protective designations such as the declaration of SSSIs and, more recently, designation of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC’s) under the Natura 2000 EU legislation has made the protective role of NNRs at least partially redundant. It therefore entered into a long review of the functions of NNRs in general and of each NNR, resulting in the dedesignation of some of these.

SNH is proposing two changes. The first is a change in the functions of NNRs. Its policy can be viewed at <http://www.nnr-scotland.org.uk> and states that *“National Nature Reserves are special places for nature, where many of the best examples of Scotland’s wildlife and landscapes are protected.”*

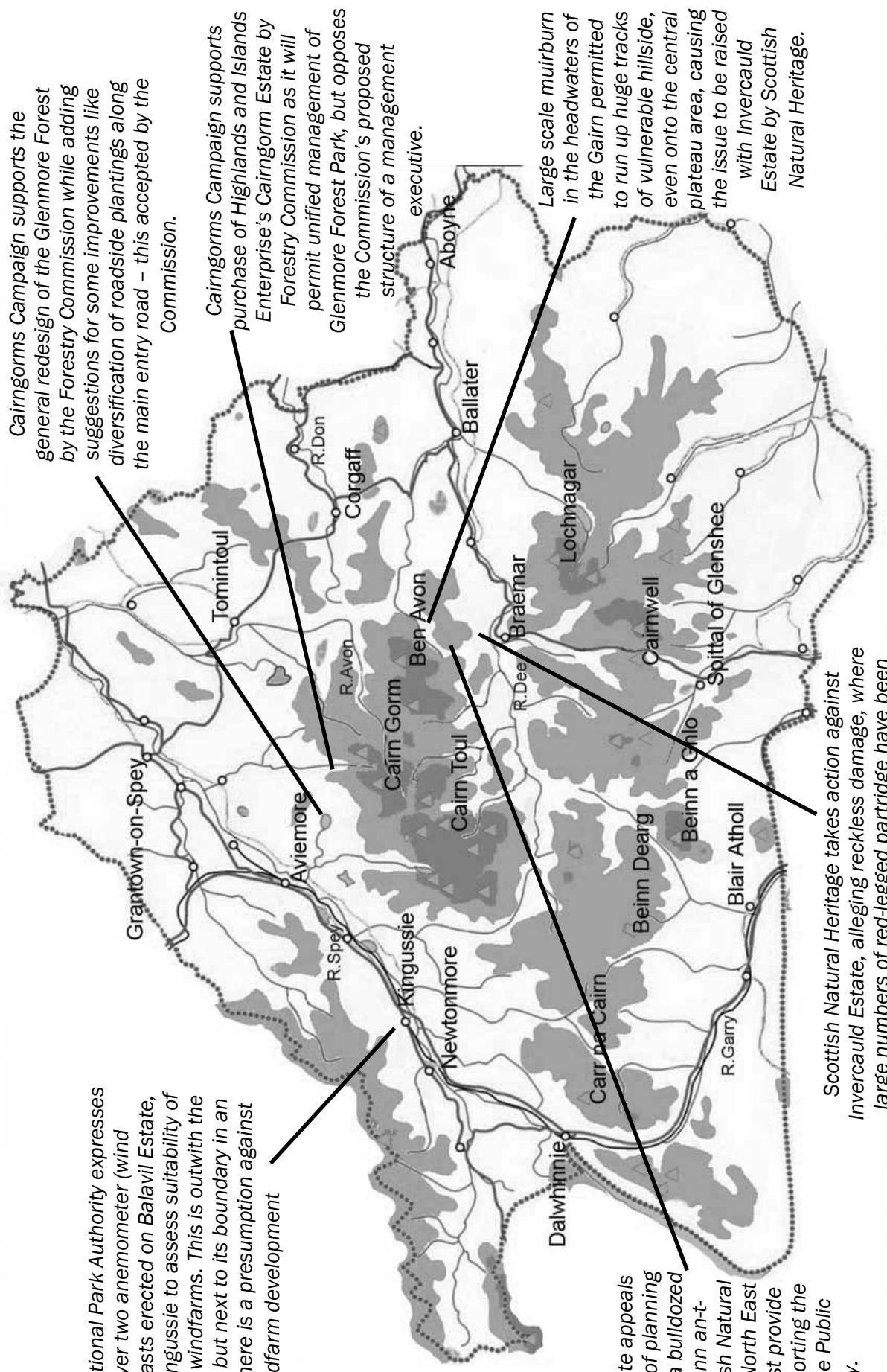
It continues:- *“Whilst nature always comes first on NNRs, they also offer special opportunities for people to experience and find out about the rich diversity of our natural heritage.*

Today, our policy for NNRs is that each reserve should achieve at least one of these key purposes:-

- *To provide opportunities for everyone to visit and enjoy the best of Scotland’s nature*
- *To allow specialised management for wildlife which depends upon it*
- *To offer opportunities for long-term research in to management for nature, and to demonstrate good practice to others.”*

The other proposal is to extend the Cairngorms NNR, now covering 26,000 hectares, but there are in fact seven NNRs within the Cairngorms National Park. The current proposed extensions include land owned by the Forestry Commission at Invereshie in Glen Feshie, some parts of the Glenmore Forest Park, and extensions to the protected land at Abernethy to include almost all the land owned by the RSPB. Discussions are also being pursued with Mar Lodge Estate, Rothiemurchus Estate, and Glen Feshie Estate about possible extensions of the NNR in these.

AROUND THE CAIRNGORMS



Cairngorms National Park Authority expresses concern over two anemometer (wind measuring) masts erected on Balavil Estate, overlooking Kingussie to assess suitability of the sites for a windfarms. This is outwith the National Park but next to its boundary in an area where there is a presumption against windfarm development

Cairngorms Campaign supports the general redesign of the Glenmore Forest by the Forestry Commission while adding suggestions for some improvements like diversification of roadside plantings along the main entry road - this accepted by the Commission.

Cairngorms Campaign supports purchase of Highlands and Islands Enterprise's Cairngorm Estate by Forestry Commission as it will permit unified management of Glenmore Forest Park, but opposes the Commission's proposed structure of a management executive.

Large scale muirburn in the headwaters of the Gairn permitted to run up huge tracks of vulnerable hillside, even onto the central plateau area, causing the issue to be raised with Invercauld Estate by Scottish Natural Heritage.

Invercauld Estate appeals against refusal of planning permission for a bulldozed track in Gleann an-t-Slugain. Scottish Natural Heritage and North East Mountain Trust provide evidence supporting the refusal for the Public Inquiry.

Scottish Natural Heritage takes action against Invercauld Estate, alleging reckless damage, where large numbers of red-legged partridge have been released for shooting on a protected site.

.THE CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL NATURE RESERVES..... contd.

In responding to SNH's consultation, the Campaign's committee supported the expansion of the NNR, but had two caveats. One was that SNH proposed giving separate parts of the NNRs separate names, but the CC's committee favoured a single name for all, namely the "Cairngorms National Nature Reserve." SNH has rejected this. The more fundamental concern CC expressed was that it was uncertain whether any of the current conservation designations adequately protected the core areas of the Cairngorms. What is meant by the word "nature" in SNH's policy statement for example? It is a singularly vague and ambiguous word. It is entirely voluntary on the part of landowners as to whether they agree to the designation of an area as a National Nature Reserve and one within the Cairngorms, the Caenlochan, has already had to be dedesignated through lack of cooperation by landowners.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) have long been the backbone of protective designations in Scotland. They give Scottish Natural Heritage powers to prevent named damaging operations on sites, but they are designed for limited, relatively small areas of land in England, not the large areas needed in Scottish mountains. National Scenic Areas (NSAs) are designated to protect landscapes but, although landscape is the basis of the whole Scottish tourism industry, they provide weak protection. The new Nature Conservation Act gives SNH the job of developing positive management plans for each SSSI along with the landowner(s) but it is early days to tell if the Act will be successful.

At the European level, Natura 2000 designations of Special Protection Areas for Birds and Special Areas of Conservation for species and habitats do not focus on the whole ecosystem and natural evolution within it and have other limitations. While they insist on prevention of further damage, they contain little or no provision for the restoration of damage already inflicted, which is already severe in some sites in the Cairngorms. Large areas of the Cairngorms are covered by no effective designation at all but, despite this the Cairngorms National Park Authority was created with no statutory powers over broader landuse. **There remain large holes at the centre of environmental protection in the Cairngorms!**

IN BRIEF

CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY PARK PLAN

The Campaign, aided by the John Muir Trust, arranged a meeting between NGOs involved in the Cairngorms and Park staff to express their views on the draft Park Plan which addresses issues and policies on broader land use within the Park. We are pressing the CNPA on a number of issues within this document and will report on this **in the next newsletter**.

CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY ACCESS STRATEGY

The Campaign has received the CNPA's draft Access Strategy and has forwarded its comments on this to Park Staff. While the Campaign supports many of the policies and measures within this strategy, it has pointed out that it focuses narrowly on the creation of path networks and is simply a subset of an overall Recreational Strategy for the Cairngorms, which the Park Authority has no apparent intention to create. The Campaign will be pursuing this matter and more information will be **in the next newsletter**.

QUICK QUOTES

Shades of climate change?

From the journal Weather, volume 57, "Two Scottish Snowpatches survive until winter 2005/06" A review of the last 10 years of snow survival compared with the previous 25 in the northeast Highlands including the Cairngorms, the snowiest part of the UK, using published data, by Dr Adam Watson and his coauthors.

"Statistical analyses of the two datasets (1971–1995 versus 1996–2005) were done with the Wilcoxon rank sum test. The annual number and the annual total lengths in the early period significantly exceeded those in the last 10 years (for number of patches, $U = 49$, two-tailed $P = .0052$; and for total length, $U = 42$, $P = 0.0026$). In other words, for total length the result randomly (i.e. due to chance) was only 1 in 385. This strongly indicates a marked decline of surviving snow over the last decade compared with the previous quarter of a century."

CAIRNGORM STORIES

FLOODING AND THE FESHIE

Rivers are tricky things – dynamic, ever-changing flows, but not just of water. They are flows of energy, solid matter and other things as well. Scotland's Highland rivers are turbulent beasts, requiring care and skill if they are to be altered by man. Sometimes, however, landowners in the Cairngorms have attempted to alter rivers in ways that backfired or were ineffective. A good example of ineffective intervention is the Cairngorm story of flooding and the river Feshie.

The Feshie is a tributary of the river Spey. It flows down Glen Feshie, out of the western Cairngorms, between Glen Tromie and Glen Einich. It is as near "natural" a river as there is in the UK and, as such, much beloved by hydrologists who study it. The Spey is a dangerous river, that has to be treated with respect. Where the Feshie joins the mightier Spey just downstream of Kincaig it forms a large gravel fan of stones and gravel dumped there largely because the Feshie's stream spreads out and is impeded where it meets the stronger flow. This fan is a natural, dynamic feature of considerable interest to hydrologists, and subject to change as river levels rise and fall. It is part of the Feshie Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI) for this reason. Just upstream of this confluence of rivers lie the Insh Marshes and Loch Insh, a wetland site of international importance – indeed a Ramsar Site!

The winters of 1988/89 and 1989/90 saw both rivers in high spate, with the Feshie dumping large quantities of gravel and stones at the fan and the waters of the Feshie itself flowing across the Spey and partly forming a "water dam." Interestingly, some people suspected that the severity of floods coming down the Feshie and the huge quantities of gravel etc coming with it were partly caused by ploughing of land in Glen Feshie to establish a forestry plantation! Both upstream and downstream of the barriers at the river confluence, there was significant flooding, with, for example, damage to some property at the side of Loch Insh as loch levels rose. Landowners started to exert pressure, partly to have the plug of deposited gravel in the Spey removed, and partly to have water levels generally in the Insh marshes lowered to increase agricultural productivity by draining land better. This last would have badly damaged the wildlife value of the Insh Marshes.

Consultants deduced that the inflow of water from the Feshie in flood did hold back flows in the Spey and hence did control the upstream levels in the Insh Marshes, but that there was no evidence that flood levels had increased overall in recent decades. Consultant engineers examined options and in 1990 gave two. One was to dig a channel through the Feshie's gravel fan leading downstream and diverting the Feshie's flow through it so that a dam was less inclined to form, which would have damaged the scientific interest of the fan. The other was to realign the Spey itself to permit a readier flow through of floodwater. This would have done similar damage to the fan, but also to the Insh Marshes. It also raised the interesting question as to who would be flooded downstream if so much water was released instead of held back at the marshes. In other words, was this about relieving flooding or about who should be flooded? That too required studies by consultants. The then Nature Conservancy Council rejected any measure that would have damaged the marshes.

In February 1992, further studies by consultants deduced that the second option, dredging the Feshie fan, would not lower flood levels upstream in the Spey, and dredging the main channel of the Spey, where it met the Feshie, would seriously damage the marshes while not lowering flood levels upstream where they were doing most damage. By that time however, the landowner had insisted on pressing ahead with dredging a downstream pointing channel on the Feshie fan.

Much wrangling then took place involving the imposition of a Nature Conservation Order to protect the fan to block further work, a compromise agreement between the Conservancy and the landowner to permit work on the Feshie fan, followed by a Public Inquiry. The dredging of the downstream-facing channel on the fan was completed

What had it all cost? What did it all achieve? Well consultants' fees totalled £180,000. Compensation paid to landowners cost £22,000. Allowing a conservative estimated cost of the Public Inquiry of £30,000, one comes to £232,000.

After allowing for staff time in government agencies and voluntary environmental bodies, plus the costs of engineering works, the grand total is unlikely to be less than £300,000.

The winter of 1992/93 saw further severe flooding with the flood alleviation channel in place. Downstream damage occurred which probably was worsened by this measure. The same winter floods also largely removed the built channel, and successive years have seen it entirely removed. The Feshie flow at its mouth diverted downstream under its own dynamic impetus. And thus the situation remains!

There are lessons in it. Rivers are complex and dynamic. Seemingly simple solutions to managing them can backfire or be ineffective. Landowners may own the bed of a river (the solum) but behave as if they own the river. An example is the farmer in Glen Clova who decided to protect his land from flooding by dredging gravel out of the river as a barrier – which resulted in that length of the river being left largely lifeless, with the land not even being well protected by a highly porous barrier of stones and gravel. As of April 1, under the Water Services and Water Environment (Scotland) Act, such activities come firmly under the aegis of the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency and its hydrologists. So perhaps this is an end to river engineering at the level of amateur brain surgery!



River “management” in Glen Clova. A digger has been used to take gravel from the river bed, leaving the river ecology badly damaged, to produce a rather ineffective flood barrier.



Digging a diversion channel in the Feshie fan. The river in flood soon removed the masses of boulders and gravel built up.

QUICK TIPS FOR HILLBILLIES

“Ticks are getting more common on the Scottish hills. They not only suck your blood but also transmit nasty diseases to humans including Lyme's Disease (Boreollosis), Ehrlichosis, and Babesosis. If you want more information on preventing and dealing with tick bites, try the website of Bada-UK

at www.bada-uk.org.”

Web: www.cairngormscampaign.org

E-mail: rdw@cairngormscampaign.org.uk

QUICK QUOTES

“Non-native golden orfe, asp, and juvenile tench were found in the Grantown skating pond. Juvenile non-native roach, rudd and adult tench were also present in Loch Beag near Aviemore ---.”

From Park Life, Winter 2005/06, magazine of the Cairngorms National Park Authority commenting on results of an electro fishing project for the Cairngorms Biodiversity Action Plan. (Some people regard bio-invasion as a serious threat to the Cairngorms environment.)