

Main Issue 7

Impacts on Natura designations

A man in a blue shirt is crouching in a forest, holding a blue sign that says "TAKING CARE". The sign also features a logo with a tree and a mountain. A large red speech bubble is overlaid on the image, containing the text: "How do we protect the Park's unique environment alongside development?".

**How do we
protect the Park's
unique environment
alongside
development?**

Background

The Cairngorms National Park is a particularly important place for nature conservation. Around half of the Park is designated as being of European importance for nature and over a quarter of the UK's rare and threatened species are found here.

It is important that the Local Development Plan continues to ensure the protection of the National Park's unique environment. In particular, we must ensure that none of the proposals within the Plan will have an adverse effect on European protected sites and species.

We think the biggest conservation issues that the next Local Development Plan will need to address are:

- making sure the proposals in the Plan do not have an adverse impact on capercaillie populations, either directly or through indirect effects such as recreation disturbance; and
- making sure the proposals in the Plan do not reduce water quality and/or quantity in the rivers Spey and Dee as this could have a negative impact on freshwater pearl mussel populations.

Capercaillie numbers in Scotland have declined significantly from an estimated 20,000 birds in 1970 to fewer than 1120 birds in the winter survey of 2015/16. With the Strathspey area holding around 80% of the remaining capercaillie population, the National Park is crucial to the long term survival of the species in the UK.

New development can contribute to impacts on capercaillie, mainly through an increase in the numbers of people recreating in forests where capercaillie are present. However, the most significant activity from new development happens in the areas immediately around the development site. In most cases this means the areas around towns and villages where people already recreate, often on well-used paths and tracks that have been used by that community and visitors to the area for many years.

The Cairngorms Capercaillie Framework has been developed to provide a strategy for the conservation of capercaillie within the National Park.

A Phase I Report was published in January 2015, and this made a series of recommendations. In respect of development planning, the report recommended the following actions:

- continue a presumption against development in forest habitat that is or could be used by capercaillie;
- all new development adjacent to sensitive capercaillie sites should include tailored packages of mitigation including recreation management planning; and
- develop a co-ordinated and proportionate approach at a landscape scale to identifying, implementing and monitoring mitigation associated with new development.

A significant amount of work is now being undertaken to progress the Cairngorms Capercaillie Framework, and the new Local Development Plan will play a key role in delivering its recommendations in relation to development planning.

The most significant change that would support the capercaillie population that uses the network of protected sites and connecting woodland of Badenoch and Strathspey would be to create significant areas of suitable woodland that is further from existing towns and villages. This would create suitable habitat that would have less disturbance from people and be more likely to support healthy populations of capercaillie across the network of sites.

Freshwater pearl mussel is identified as a species for targeted action within the Cairngorms Nature Action Plan and is one of the qualifying features for a number of the National Park's Special Areas of Conservation, including the rivers Spey and Dee. A recent survey of freshwater pearl mussel sites in the river Spey highlighted a 50% decline in the population. The reasons for this are still being investigated, but water quality and quantity is considered to play a significant role. In order to ensure the long term survival of the species, it is therefore important that new development does not lead to any reduction in water quality and/or quantity.



Preferred Option

We think the new Local Development Plan should support delivery of the Cairngorms Capercaillie Framework. In particular, we think the new Plan should include a revised and more co-ordinated approach to capercaillie mitigation and conservation measures on a landscape scale. We could do this by designing packages of measures to address the cumulative impacts of new development proposals around areas which are most sensitive for capercaillie and support the growth of good capercaillie habitat in the locations where it will have least disturbance from people. This would help us deliver the new development that our communities need and support the long term future of capercaillie populations.

We will work closely with Scottish Water and SEPA to ensure that there will be sufficient capacity to treat any waste water created by new development to the appropriate legal standards, taking particular account of freshwater pearl mussel, before it is released back into the river environment. We will also work with Scottish Water and SEPA to ensure that there will be sufficient capacity for the water abstraction levels needed to support future development.



Reasonable Alternative Options

For capercaillie, it would be reasonable to continue the existing Local Development Plan's approach, which requires individual development proposals to demonstrate that they will not have an adverse impact on capercaillie populations, and to include appropriate mitigation measures to address their own impacts. However, this approach lacks the co-ordination recommended by the Cairngorms Capercaillie Framework, does not address the existing issues of disturbance to capercaillie, and fails to provide long term certainty about suitable capercaillie habitat.

We do not think there is any reasonable alternative to the preferred approach set out above in relation to freshwater pearl mussel.



Questions

- Do you agree that the new Local Development Plan should include a more co-ordinated approach towards delivering wider packages of capercaillie mitigation and conservation measures?

