

# An Interpretive Framework for the Cairngorms

## Introduction

1. The Cairngorms National Park Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism identifies the need for quality interpretation and visitor information. It contains a number of actions to improve visitor information and interpretation but the work requires to be developed further. This paper outlines a framework for interpretation based on work initiated with Professor Sam Ham and brings together existing work and fills the gaps in the provision. This paper also identifies a number of actions required to take this work forward.
2. **Members of the ViSIT Advisory Forum are invited to provide feedback on the Interpretive Framework prior to it being presented to the Cairngorms National Park Authority Board.**

## Definitions and Roles

3. In developing an Interpretive Framework we are choosing to use a wide definition developed by Sam Ham:

*“Strategic Interpretation is purposeful communication with an intended outcome.”*

4. As with all work in this area the role of the Park Authority is to collectively achieve a coordinated approach to interpretation across the Park. The cooperation of public, private and community partners will be essential to ensure successful delivery.

## Interpretive Planning

5. Sam Ham has identified the sequential steps that should be followed in the interpretive planning process at a strategic level as follows:

1. Interpretive Inventory
2. Define Interpretive Goals
3. Identify Audiences
4. Determine Outcomes for Goals
5. Develop Interpretive Themes
6. Develop Media Matrices
7. Interpretation Plan
8. Evaluation Process

This paper develops the framework as far as Step 5.

## Interpretive Inventory (Step 1)

6. There is no comprehensive inventory of interpretation throughout the Park. The Highland Interpretive Strategy undertook an inventory for the Highland area of the Park in the late 1990's. The work that is currently being undertaken on the National Park Outdoor Access Audit will provide some further information. However, there will still be gaps in the data. Anecdotally, it appears that some of the existing information and interpretation in the Park is in disrepair or out of date. Therefore, once surveyed, there is an opportunity to

improve what is already ‘on the ground’. The numbers in brackets in the Action boxes cross refer to the relevant action in the Sustainable Tourism Action Plan.

***Action 1: CNPA to commission an Interpretive Inventory to determine the quality and location of interpretation in the National Park. The Inventory will be part photographic and linked to a computer based mapping system on GIS. (ref 4a)***

***Action 2: CNPA to work with partners to encourage existing interpretation that does not meet quality standards to be upgraded, replaced or removed.***

**Interpretive Goals, Audiences and Outcomes (Steps 2, 3 and 4)**

7. This part of the framework is based on four Goals that Sam Ham advises should be part of every strategic approach to interpretation in protected areas.

<b>Goal</b>	<b>Strategic Audiences</b>	<b>Goal Outcomes</b>
1. Promote the Park as a destination	1. Visitors to the Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Audiences report that inspiring pre-arrival information about the Park is readily available in a variety of formats</li> <li>b) Audiences report that they know the location of the Park and when they are within it</li> </ul>
2. Enhance visitor experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Visitors to the Park</li> <li>2. Residents of the Park who are undertaking recreational visits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Audiences report that they are aware they are in the National Park</li> <li>b) Audiences report that they know where to find attractions, activities and places of interest</li> <li>c) Audiences report that they are inspired about the National Park</li> <li>d) Audiences report that they understand the special qualities of the area and the need to conserve and enhance these qualities.</li> </ul>
3. Protect resources and promote responsible outdoor access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People undertaking recreational visits in the Park</li> <li>2. Land Managers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) People undertaking recreational visits report that land is managed responsibly to encourage outdoor access</li> <li>b) Land managers report that people taking outdoor access behave responsibly</li> </ul>
4. Promote public support for the Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People who live in and around the Park</li> <li>2. Visitors to the Park</li> <li>3. Opinion formers and decision makers</li> <li>4. The people of Scotland</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Audiences report that they are well informed about the work of the Park Authority and other organisations and what they are doing to deliver the four Park aims</li> <li>b) Audiences report that they are inspired by the work being undertaken in the Park.</li> </ul>

## Interpretive Themes (Step 5)

8. Before looking at each Goal in turn it is necessary to review the work undertaken on interpretive themes. In September 2004 around 70 delegates attended workshops facilitated by Sam Ham to develop themes for the National Park to enhance visitor experiences. Five broad subject areas were identified: -
- Themes linking human activity to the landscape
  - Themes celebrating the natural heritage of the area
  - Themes celebrating the cultural diversity of the area
  - Themes celebrating the recreational opportunities available
  - Themes celebrating the produce of the area

Annex 1 provides details of the workshops and the specific themes written. Some of these have already been used to develop branded displays in Aviemore and Grantown Tourist Information Centres. Nevertheless these themes are not unique to the Cairngorms and would apply to many areas of Scotland.

9. A review of the special qualities of the Park encountered a similar difficulty, concluding that what is special about the area is the unique combination of factors that are found. However, this complex amalgam does not lend itself to a persuasive interpretive theme.
10. The workshops did, however, produce a lot of discussion and consensus was reached about the significance of the mountain core to the whole of the Park. Therefore, it is proposed that the central theme, the unique feature of the Park is that:

***"It is really important for visitors to understand that the Cairngorm Mountains have shaped the people, culture, landscapes and natural heritage of the Park"***

The themes described previously all become sub-themes that are directly linked to this central theme.

11. It is further proposed that interpretation throughout the Park is linked to the central theme: it is the mountains that make the Park. This link to the Cairngorm Mountains will give the visitor a strong 'sense of place' in the Park.
12. The development of this central theme will require input from the Park Authority and partners.

***Action 3: CNPA to work with stakeholders to develop a set of criteria for developing interpretation based around the central theme of the influence of the Cairngorms Mountains***

***Action 4: CNPA and partners to organise a series of talks, events and presentations around the Park conveying the influence of the Cairngorms on people, culture, landscapes and natural heritage*** (ref 4g,6f)

## **Goal 1: Promoting the Park as a Destination**

13. The Sustainable Tourism Strategy and Action Plan and the Point of Entry Marker and Branding projects already cover this goal to a very significant extent. The main outstanding work relates to signage to the Park and the development of a website.

***Action 5: CNPA to work with Local Authorities and Scottish Executive to develop and implement a policy on pre-arrival signage to the National Park*** (ref 4i)

***Action 6: CNPA to work with VisitScotland and other partners to develop a single website targeted at visitors to the National Park*** (ref 3d)

## **Goal 2: Enhancing Visitor Experiences**

14. Currently there is little evidence to inform the resident or visitor that they are within the Cairngorms National Park. This situation will improve over next w few weeks as the entry point signs are erected on main roads to complement those that are already in place at train stations. A number of actions are listed below to improve the sense of being in the Park. Wherever possible the new Park brand should be linked to interpretation.

***Action 7: CNPA to work with local authorities, Visit Scotland, communities and local businesses to develop and implement a policy on signage within the National Park.*** (ref 4i)

***Action 8: CNPA should continue to work with partners to develop Park Branded information and interpretation in Tourist Information Centers, Ranger Bases and visitor attractions.*** (4e)

***Action 9: CNPA to work with communities to develop Park branded information and interpretation on existing community information panels and notice-boards.*** (3a,9d)

15. The CNPA is well placed to provide a lead role, in partnership with others, in delivering and developing Park-wide information and interpretation for visitors. Current examples include: -

- Visitor Guide
- Cairngorms Countryside Events Leaflet
- Walking Festivals Leaflet
- Integrated public transport timetable (in production)
- Gaelic Place Names Leaflet (in production)

16. It has already been identified that there is demand for Park-wide information for visitors in certain topic areas: outdoor recreation opportunities, cultural heritage, and working landscapes.

***Action 10: CNPA should work with partners to develop a range of Park-wide information and interpretation for visitors. Priority should be given to Park wide information on recreation opportunities, cultural heritage, working landscapes.*** (4b)

17. The development of themed local information and interpretation about the special qualities of the Park is key to enhancing the visitor experience. It is proposed that this is achieved by partnership agreement to developing this framework. Many organisations both fund and deliver interpretation throughout the Park and their support is essential. See Action 3.

18. Communities should be encouraged to develop their own interpretive plans supported by grants and technical back up from both CNPA and other funding organisations.

***Action 11: CNPA to develop and promote a strand of the integrated grant scheme to allow communities to develop local interpretation. CNPA and partners to provide technical advice on funding and interpretation to communities developing local interpretation. (6g)***

***Action 12: CNPA, through its Land Based Business Training Programme, to develop interpretive training programmes. (4g)***

### **Goal 3: Protecting Resources and Promoting Responsible Outdoor Access**

19. The promotion of responsible outdoor access under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 is a duty of the Park Authority and Scottish Natural Heritage. This is currently being undertaken with a wide variety of local and national partners. The Park Authority also has duties to form a Local Outdoor Access Forum, to prepare a Core Paths Plan and to uphold access rights.
20. While promotion of responsible access can go a long way to protecting resources, some topics require specific attention in the context of the whole Park. The prevention of wild fires caused by visitors has, for example, been identified as a particular cause for concern, and there may be other areas where people feel that there is a Park-wide need raise awareness of specific resource protection issues.

***Action 14: CNPA to work with partners to develop Park-wide information on specific resource protection issues (e.g. wild fire prevention, disturbance from dogs, minimizing impacts of snow-holing, etc) (1a)***

***Action 15: CNPA to consult with Integrated Land Management Advisory Forum and others on other resource protection issues that require Park-wide interpretation. (1b)***

### **Goal 4: Promoting Support for the Park**

21. The existing park Authority Communication Strategy which has been approved by the Board covers effectively this Goal.

### **Discussion**

Members of the ViSIT Advisory Forum are invited to provide feedback on both the Interpretive Framework and the Action Plan prior to it being presented to the Cairngorms National Park Authority Board.

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April 2005**

## Annex 1: Interpretive Themes for the Cairngorms National Park

### Background

In September 2004 around 70 representatives from organisations working with visitors to the Cairngorms met at three workshops in Kingussie, Tomintoul and Ballater. The workshops included representatives from visitor attractions, museums, local tourist associations, ranger services, estates, Gaelic language organisations, community councils and Cairngorms National Park Authority Board Members. There was also a wide representation from public bodies such as SNH, Forestry Commission Scotland, Local Authorities, Local Enterprise Companies and Area Tourist Boards.

The aim of the workshops was to start the process of developing strong interpretive themes aimed at enhancing the experience of visitors to the Cairngorms National Park. Professor Sam Ham led the workshops assisted by a team from the National Park Authority. Sam Ham is a leading authority on strategic interpretive planning for national parks and protected areas.

The outputs from the workshops will contribute to a larger interpretive planning process which will include elements on signage, resource protection and promotion of responsible access.

### Process

Sam Ham explained the communication theory behind the development of strong interpretive themes and the desire to encourage visitors to have positive experiences that produce lasting memories. He then provided practical guidance on how to determine the special qualities of the area and from this how to write strong interpretive themes. Participants were then asked to write themes for the Cairngorms.

The themes produced from all three workshops were recorded.

### Themes for the Cairngorms

The themes developed at the workshops were not written in a systematic way so as to allow verifiable analysis of the relative merits of each theme. However, categorising the themes into broad subject areas does, perhaps, give an indication of emphasis that stakeholders would like to see when developing interpretation for the Cairngorms. Categorising the themes is in itself somewhat subjective as many themes are not exclusive.

Allowing for all of the above the following broad subject areas were easily identified:-

- Themes linking human activity to the land.
- Themes celebrating the natural heritage of the area
- Themes celebrating the cultural diversity of the area.
- Themes celebrating the recreational opportunities available
- Themes celebrating the produce of the area.

### Themes Linking Human Activity to the Land

Nearly half of all the themes written fell into this category. Delegates appeared to find it easy to write such themes and they seemed to feel that the interaction of humans and 'land' were one of the key factors in making the Cairngorms a special place.

Themes in this category are typified by stating *it is really important for a visitor to the Cairngorms to understand that:* -

- *man has evolved with the landscape and the landscape has evolved with man.*
- *it was created by nature, nurtured by man and enjoyed by you and me.*
- *it is a landscape fashioned by fire, shaped by ice and inhabited by you and me.*
- *people and place are seamlessly interwoven.*
- *this wild and beautiful landscape has been shaped by human activity as well as the forces of nature.*
- *it has a unique pattern of landscape shaped by the forces of man and nature.*
- *it is not only an area of outstanding natural beauty but also a place where people live and work.*
- *I came to visit the wilderness but found that it was full of people who care.*
- *it is a place where the landscape affects people and people affect the landscape.*
- *in these 1500 square miles people and mountains merge to create a unique and challenging land.*
- *this is not just a place where people have shaped the land but also a place where the land has and always will shape people.*
- *this is a place where humans and nature have been involved in a 7,000 year love affair.*

The huge lump of mountains that is the Cairngorms also featured strongly at all the workshops. The fact that the ‘massif’ is visible around the Park and forms the backdrop to all activity seems to be an important feature of the area but people struggled to articulate that directly in any interpretive themes.

### **Themes Celebrating the Natural Heritage of the Area.**

Over a quarter of the themes produced can be considered to fall into this broad area. Despite people having strong feelings about the importance of the natural heritage of the area they appeared to find it difficult to capture their emotion in a theme. Some themes looked at the area in totality while others focussed on specific features such as the native pinewoods.

Examples of themes in this category are formed by stating, *it is really important for visitors to the Cairngorms to understand that:* -

- *the artic is only a few steps from your doorstep.*
- *it's a place where you can wake up with dotterel on an artic plateau and sleep with pine marten in an ancient Caledonian Forest.*
- *the richness and diversity of nature are what make the Park so special.*
- *conservation and preservation are critical to the well being of the area.*

- *to sit in silence amongst ancient pines is to enter one of nature's cathedrals.*

When asked many people felt that there was no one feature of the natural heritage that stood out, what appeared special was the variety and diversity of habitats, and number of rare species to be found in one area.

### **Themes Celebrating the Cultural Heritage of the Area.**

Delegates also appeared to feel strongly that the cultural heritage of the Cairngorms was special. However, it proved challenging for people to express this in themes. Many discussions seemed to focus on the feeling that the Park was special because it was an area where many different cultural influences came together.

Themes in this category can be formed by stating, *it is really important for visitors to the Cairngorms to understand that:* -

- *it is an area that has long inspired poets, artists, authors and photographers.*
- *the cultural, historical and geographic diversity is unique.*
- *this is a place where the unique cultural mix produces an intoxicating brew.*
- *when you start to translate the place names it's clear that the Gaelic speaking people had an intimate relationship with the land.*

There were several conversations about the built heritage in the area (castles, Victorian lodges etc) but no strong themes resulted.

### **Themes Celebrating the Recreational Opportunities Available**

Discussions about the special recreational qualities again focused on the variety and diversity of opportunity available.

Themes in this category are typified by completing the sentence, *it is really important for visitors to the Cairngorms to understand that:* -

- *it offers a rich variety of activities for those of all ages and all abilities.*
- *no matter what your ability there is something for you to enjoy in the park.*
- *you can have a new experience every day.*

Attempts were made to develop a theme about the number of international sportspeople including skiers, cyclists, highland games specialists who had grown up in the Cairngorms. However, while none of these discussions produced a strong theme it may be possible to look on it as another example of the landscape shaping human activity.

### **Themes Celebrating the Produce of the Area**

A few themes focused specifically on the production of high quality food.

The statement that conveys all these is: -

- *It is really important for visitors to the Cairngorms to understand that this is an area where man and nature work together to produce the best of food.*



### **Unclassified Themes**

A few people tried to develop a spiritual theme to the area but the results did not appear to relate directly to the Cairngorms.

A couple of themes also attempted to develop the idea of Royal patronage to the area but these tended to stray into the area of tourism branding e.g. *an area that is fit for royal patronage*.

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September 2004