

2. THE CAIRNGORMS – A SPECIAL PLACE



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WHY is the Cairngorms a National Park?

‘The Cairngorms are regarded as the most important mountain system in the country and of international importance for nature conservation.’

(Nature Conservation Review 1977)

‘The qualities of our area are those that any other area in the world would fight for, tooth and nail – the beauty, diversity and importance of our world-class environment, both natural and cultural, and our very accessible location.’ *(Cairngorms Chamber of Commerce 2004)*



Photo: Paul Tomkins, VisitScotland/Scottish Viewpoint.



Photo: David Gowans.

The Special Qualities of the Cairngorms

The Cairngorms area is recognised locally and internationally for its outstanding natural and cultural environment. While everyone who lives in or visits the Park will enjoy particular aspects, there are some special qualities of the area that are commonly expressed.

Many areas of Scotland can boast some of these qualities, but it is their particular combination in one area that makes the Cairngorms National Park truly distinctive and underpins its designation.

Distinctive Landscape

The distinctive combination of mountain plateaux, open moorland, extensive forests, rivers, lochs and farmland give the area a character recognised by visitors and residents alike, at a scale unique in the UK. The landscape offers a range of experiences including senses of wildness and tranquillity, adventure and inspiration, rest and reflection. As well as providing a record of the natural history of the area, the landscape provides a rich cultural history of human lives and land-use through the pattern of crofts, farms and estates, managed and designed landscapes.

Facts and Figures

- 39 per cent of the area of the Park is designated as nationally important for nature conservation;
- 25 per cent of the area of the Park is designated as being of European importance for nature conservation;
- two National Scenic Areas;
- four of Scotland's five highest mountains and 49 Munros - mountains over 3,000ft (914m);
- home to 25 per cent of the UK's rare and threatened species;
- internationally important geological record and landforms;
- largest area of semi-natural woodland in Britain;
- only extensive area of arctic-alpine habitat in Britain;
- 424 listed buildings;
- 60 scheduled ancient monuments;
- approximately 16,000 people live in the Park.



Photo: David Gowans.



Photo: Jimmy Mitchell.

Rich Biodiversity

The varied landscape and land management have given the Cairngorms an important and unique biodiversity of local, national and international importance. The Park contains the largest areas of montane and semi-natural woodland habitats in Britain, together with high quality freshwater and farmland habitats. 25 per cent of the UK's 'priority species' on the Government's biodiversity list are present in the Park. These include the globally threatened freshwater pearl mussel, genetically distinct populations of arctic charr; and protected species such as capercaillie. The scale and connectivity of habitats in the Park are particularly unusual and valuable.



Photo: David Gowans.

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Mountains and Moorland

The mountains and moorland dominate the landscape of much of the Park. As well as providing important and fragile habitats supporting a unique biodiversity, the mountains form an extensive area with a wild and remote character. The surrounding moorlands create a transition from the more intensively managed straths and glens to open land which supports a number of uses. These include farming, sporting management and recreation activities.

Forests and Woodlands

The extensive areas of woodland in Strathspey and Deeside are particularly characteristic of the Cairngorms area. Set against the mountain background, these form an iconic identity. The woodlands include the largest area of semi-natural woodland in Britain (25 per cent of the Scottish resource) and the largest extent of Caledonian pine woodland, the western-most remaining part of the once extensive northern European boreal forest.

Rivers and Lochs

The extensive network of rivers and lochs is an important component of the landscape, particularly in the straths where there are extensive floodplains. Recognised as being of European importance for their biodiversity, the rivers are also an important cultural and economic resource. They provide fishing and recreation, and have influenced the development of settlements, land-use and many place names throughout the Park.

Recreation and Enjoyment

The characteristic sense of wildness associated with the Cairngorms is combined with an accessibility to many areas that offers people unique opportunities for recreation. From activities such as those available at the three ski centres, mountaineering centres and mountain biking facilities; to the quiet enjoyment of informal walks, kayaking or exploring; to fieldsports and organised sport; the area gives many people a chance to enjoy an outstanding natural environment, in many different ways.

Distinctive Architecture and Settlements

Within a common tradition of architectural style across the Park there is a wealth of local building styles that give each area a distinctive character. Traditional materials include granite, blue whinstone and timber, with roofs of slate or corrugated sheeting, their use being determined by local availability, weather patterns and craftsmanship. Planned settlements such as Grantown-on-Spey, Ballater and Tomintoul, together with traditional single-street settlements and the presence of country houses, farm and estate buildings combine to give the Park its distinct built character.

Communities

Clustered around the higher hills, the communities of the Park share many characteristics but have developed distinct identities. Common to all is a



quality of life and connection to the area, through the influence of the past on the landscape and the present day land-use, sport and recreation. The area produces many mountaineers, snow-sports enthusiasts and others influenced by their natural environment.

3. MANAGING THE PARK IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT



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The special qualities of the Park described in Section 2 are part of a dynamic environment and the result of a long history of changing natural processes, management, and perceptions. The qualities that we value today are a snap-shot in time of social and environmental conditions that are continually evolving.

The designation of the National Park brings a particular focus to these qualities and a special responsibility for their management, but it does not halt the processes of change and evolution. Landscapes evolve, species expand and contract as their habitats and environmental conditions change, and communities change in their size and profile.

In setting out to conserve and enhance the special qualities, we must recognise that changes do occur over time, that we cannot control all the factors which cause change, and that the implications of change can be both positive and negative in terms of the Park's objectives.

A Brief History of the Cairngorms

The National Park may be new, but the Cairngorm mountains and their surroundings are very old. In fact, their story begins over 400 million years ago when granite rock melted deep beneath the earth's crust. It gradually rose towards the surface until it solidified, over millions of years, below a covering of older rocks. Weathering and erosion gradually removed the older rock above the granite, until it was exposed at the surface.

About 50 million years ago, when the climate was much warmer and wetter than we know today, the shape of the Cairngorms that we now recognise started to form by deep weathering and erosion along lines of weakness in the rock.

Far more recently, during the last glaciation about 2.5 million years ago, the landscape was shaped by glaciers which carved deep troughs such as the Lairig Ghru and Glen Avon. Since then water and weathering has continued to shape the plateaux, straths and glens that we know and enjoy today, and will continue to shape them into the future.

As well as these impressive natural processes, the area has been shaped by human habitation and changing land-use over the last 3000 years. The ancient settlements and transport routes through the hills, the use of timber and introduction of grazing animals have all helped to shape the landscape. Most recently, in the last 500 years, the pattern of estates, farms and crofts that we recognise today has come into being. Agricultural improvement, changing forest management and the development of sheep farming and deer stalking have all led to the formation of the current landscape. Their ongoing management continues to actively shape it.

The land-uses, and how society values the area, have continually evolved through time. For example, the forests of the Park have been used and managed by people for different objectives as times change. In the mid-eighteenth century, the forests like those at Glenmore and Abernethy were valued for the quality of their timber for the ship-building industry that developed at Speymouth.

In the nineteenth century, the forests became valued for their sporting opportunities, the same period during which deer stalking on the moorland became fashionable. The twentieth century saw the forests valued for their conservation and biodiversity value, and a broad range of recreational opportunities. These shifting public values will continue to develop into the future.

Responding to External Changes

The National Park sits within a much bigger picture, and cannot isolate itself from changes that are taking place beyond the Park boundary. These changes will influence how we can achieve the four aims of the Park, and may require management and objectives to adapt through time. The Park will be affected by global and national trends including climate change, economic patterns, population change, social attitudes, work patterns, national and international policy and legislation.

Management of the Park cannot control these changes but it must respond to them, and continually consider how to achieve the four aims of the Park, and conserve and enhance its special qualities in the changing context. To help this process, research into the likely changes and impacts is an important part of forward planning.

Climate Change

Changes in climate will undoubtedly influence the natural heritage and recreation opportunities of the Cairngorms over time. The full extent of change cannot be predicted, but national trends indicate more storm events and a warmer climate. In the Cairngorms, trends including a reduction in snow-lie in recent years are already evident. A warming temperature would result in the range of montane species shrinking, and an expansion of some lower-ground habitats such as woodland to higher ground. If average temperatures continue to rise at the rate of the 1980s -1990s, then changes in species composition could be seen as early as 2010-2020.

An Integrated Approach

In this changing environment, the long-term success of the Park requires the management of its different aspects to be integrated into a coherent approach to meet the four aims collectively.

The people, places and special qualities of the Cairngorms are already strongly connected and interdependent. The landscape, habitats and species that give the area its special character are actively shaped by land management and the communities have evolved with close connections to local land-uses and landscapes. In turn, the landscape and natural environment are a key attraction to visitors and form the basis of the tourism sector. Directly and indirectly, this accounts for a significant proportion of the local economy.

The activities of any one sector can impact on many aspects of the Park. Its management must recognise these linkages, the mutual dependence and the opportunities that come from an integrated approach.

Managing Conflict

The purpose of the Park Authority and the Park Plan is to ensure the four aims of the Park are achieved collectively, which requires an integrated approach to the aims and objectives of the Plan and management of the Park. However, where there appears to the Park Authority to be a conflict between the first aim of the Park – to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage – and the other three aims, section 9(6) of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 requires that greater weight be given to the first aim.

This approach is consistent with the long-term sustainability of the Park and the ability to continue the delivery of its four aims into the future. Integration between the aims is vital, but the natural and cultural resources which underpin the Park's designation and importance must not be compromised. Given the interactions highlighted above, their conservation and, where possible, enhancement is vital to the Park's future and the delivery of the other three aims.

3. MANAGING THE PARK IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT...cont

For this reason, the theme of conserving and enhancing the special qualities runs through all sections of this plan. Whether it is objectives for land management, affordable housing, tourism or others, management must be consistent with conserving and enhancing the special qualities and prevent damage to them. This integrated approach should minimise the potential conflicts, through identifying them at the start of the planning and management process.

Where conflict does occur, greater weight will be given to the conservation and enhancement of the natural and cultural resources. The Strategic Environmental Assessment will assist in identifying significant effects on the natural and cultural resources and informing decisions where there may be potential conflict.

Diversity within the Park

There is a wide diversity of landscape, land-uses, management and community priorities across different parts of the Park. The Draft Park Plan recognises that this diversity is part of what creates the special qualities valued in the Park. Within the strategic approach set out in the Plan, there is scope for variation of implementation in different areas of the Park and at different times.

Spatial zoning is often used as a means to identify areas where different priorities or management regimes apply. In developing the Draft Park Plan, the Park Authority has considered the use of zoning as a tool to help achieve the aims and objectives of the Park Plan.

There is already a high degree of spatial zoning within the Park, that identifies particular management needs or priorities. For example, the range of natural heritage designations including Natura 2000 sites, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserves identify areas where particular natural heritage objectives apply; and the Local Plan also uses zoning to identify areas most suited to future development.

The Draft Park Plan does not attempt to divide the Park further into separate zones within which different objectives apply. To do so would require a definitive split of objectives and management approach between areas that cannot necessarily be determined so discretely. It would weaken the integrated approach that is set out in the objectives, through which the special qualities of the Park are considered in all areas and in all sectors.



Photo: Jimmy Mitchell.

The Plan therefore identifies an agenda for the Park as a whole through a series of strategic objectives. The application of these objectives will vary across the Park in different areas and at different times. For some, implementation will require more detailed and area-specific strategies which will be developed. The key implementation strategies which will influence how the Plan's objectives are achieved in more detail are noted under the objectives of relevant sections. These are currently under development by the Park Authority and its partners, and will be informed by the consultation on this Draft Plan.

Building on Experience

Part of the long history of the Cairngorms is a legacy of research, discussion and debate over the management of the Cairngorms area. For much of the twentieth century it was identified as a potential National Park, although at that time, there were no National Parks in Scotland. In 1995, following the recommendations of the Cairngorms Working

Party, the Cairngorms Partnership was established to bring a co-ordinated approach to managing the area. This approach succeeded in developing effective partnerships and taking forward action in a number of important areas.

These previous initiatives have resulted in a number of strategies for the area. These include a Forest and Woodland Framework, Catchment Management Plans and work on housing, all of which has helped to shape this Draft Plan. Work to ensure the success of the National Park will require further development of this partnership approach.

This background provides a wealth of experience and information amongst many people in the Park and beyond. The designation of the National Park brings a fresh opportunity to build on this work and a new impetus to managing the issues facing the Cairngorms area. It places everyone at the start of an exciting new chapter in the long history of the Cairngorms.



Photo: Jimmy Mitchell

3. MANAGING THE PARK IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT...cont

Guiding Principles

To help meet the challenge of integration against a backdrop of continual change, the following principles underpin the Plan. They provide a guide to long-term management and decision-making in working towards the vision, objectives and priorities for action identified in the Plan. They should be used as a check by all when working towards the objectives of the Plan.

1. Sustainable Development

The Park's natural and cultural resources should be managed, used and enjoyed in ways that conserve and enhance them for future generations, while ensuring that those who currently live in, work in and visit the Park are able to use and enjoy them.

This means:

- Management of the Park should not compromise the special qualities of the area;
- The interactions between the economic, social and environmental resources should be actively identified, managed and developed;
- The impacts of management on economic, social and environmental resources both within the Park and beyond its boundary should be identified and managed.

2. Social Justice

Access to the benefits from the Park's resources in terms of living, working and enjoying the Park should be available to everyone regardless of economic, physical or social constraints.

This means:

- Everyone, regardless of physical or economic constraints should be able to enjoy the special qualities of the area by some means;
- Access to appropriate services and social infrastructure for everyone living in or visiting the Park.

3. People Participating in the Park

People within and outside the Park should be actively involved in shaping the Park and its management, and be well informed about the Park and its management.

This means:

- Communicating effectively between public, private, community and voluntary sectors, locally and nationally;

- Developing simple and accessible ways for local communities to engage in and influence the management of the Park, including community planning;
- Local communities taking responsibility for their role in the management of the Park;
- Encouraging national engagement with the National Park.

4. Managing Change

Management of the Park should recognise processes of change, actively consider potential future impacts and manage change in an informed way using best available information.

This means:

- Identifying likely changes over which everyone has little or no influence and planning accordingly;
- Identifying desirable changes and taking the necessary leadership roles to shape positive change;
- Thinking ahead to consider likely implications of change and sourcing the information needed to inform debate and decisions.

5. Effective Governance

The management structures in the Park should be co-ordinated and efficient, tailored to delivering positive and tangible outcomes for the Park.

This means:

- Effective co-ordination between public bodies at strategic and delivery levels;
- Effective partnerships of public, private, community and voluntary interests;
- Committing to transparency and adding value in managing the Park;
- Learning from other areas at home and abroad;
- Effective sharing of information and knowledge;
- Building trust and co-operation amongst different interests.

4. VISION



4. VISION

The Park in 25 Years Time

The Cairngorms National Park will be seen as an exemplar of integrated and sustainable management, and will share its experience to inform the management of other areas of Scotland and beyond.



Conserving, Enhancing and Managing the Park

The Park will be increasingly recognised around the world for its outstanding natural environment – the high plateaux; corries and glens; the extensive open moorland; the pine and birch woods; and the straths with farmland along the clean rivers, lochs and burns. These areas will continue to be home to a wide range of habitats and species. The network of habitats across the Park will be in good condition, including sites identified as being of national and international importance which will be exemplars of good management.

The distinctive landscape character of the Park will be enhanced through improved management. This includes the extension of alpine scrub, improved woodland networks, and restoration of the more unsightly landscape scars such as redundant vehicle tracks and eroded footpaths. It will still be a landscape shaped by active land-use and management as well as natural

processes. There will be a productive mix of farming, forestry, game and wildlife management.

There will be thriving populations of characteristic species such as dotterel, ptarmigan and mountain hare on the high tops; hen harrier and grouse on moorland; golden plover and dunlin on mires; black grouse and capercaillie in the forest; lapwings, oyster catchers and curlew on farmland; otter and salmon in the rivers; and osprey feeding in the lochs.

In the Park's towns, villages and farms, the best examples of distinctive local architecture will be protected. Sustainable and innovative new buildings will be exemplars of good practice. Growth of settlements will safeguard the traditional pattern and character of the built heritage.

The evidence of previous generations living in the area, both the physical remains such as cairns, stone circles, abandoned shielings, drove roads, and castles; and the less tangible evidence of



Photo: Highlands and Islands Enterprise.



Photo: David Gowans.



Photo: Jimmy Mitchell

traditions, stories and songs, will be well recorded, cared for, and accessible to understand and appreciate.

Throughout the Park, residents, visitors, businesses and organisations will all contribute in some way to conserving and enhancing what is so special about their part of the Cairngorms.

Communities Living and Working in the Park

Thriving and inclusive communities will sustain, and in turn be sustained by, the special natural and cultural qualities of the Cairngorms. The outstanding environment will stimulate economic activity rather than constrain it and diverse local businesses will flourish.

All people in the Park will be able to find housing, education and training, employment and services that meet their needs. There will be efficient transport systems operating within and beyond

4. VISION...cont

the Park to meet the needs of communities and visitors. Businesses will feel they are a part of the Park, benefit from it, offer a high quality service and experience and be involved in environmental management.

Communities will play an active role in shaping the Park and will have the confidence to share their ideas, experience and culture. Community involvement in policy development and implementation will be normal practice.

Understanding and Enjoying the Park

Residents and visitors will enjoy, understand and support the special qualities of the Park in many different ways, through visitor and recreation experiences of the highest quality. A wide range of outdoor access opportunities on both land and

water will be available to everyone for responsible enjoyment, fun, spiritual rejuvenation, sport and healthy living. Everyone will be encouraged to experience the varied landscape of the Park, from the open uplands to the woodlands and rivers, in ways that respect the natural environment and cultural heritage of the area.

Visitors will come to the Park year-round to enjoy its fine landscapes, appreciate its wildlife and heritage, explore its character and take part in a range of activities. They will be fully aware of what the Park has to offer; understand the importance of conservation of the area and be keen to support this. Residents will be well-informed about the area and keen to communicate their knowledge and the needs of those living, working and visiting the Park will be mutually respected.



Photo: Neil McIntyre.