5. Environmental Baseline and Issues

Environmental baseline of the Cairngorms National Park

5.1 The current environmental conditions form the baseline for considering potential impacts. In the absence of change, the current trends are considered likely to continue. This section of the Environmental Report describes the current environmental baseline and trends that are considered relevant to the Cairngorms National Park and Draft Core Paths Plan.

5.2 Figure 5.1 below summarises the key environmental baseline facts. Maps 5.1 to 5.6 provide an overview of the distribution of a range of environmental features in the National Park. Detailed data is available in the State of the Park Report[9].

Figure 5.1 – Key baseline facts

Resource	Key Facts
Biodiversity	• 25% of UK's threatened species present • 12.5% of Scotland's semi-natural woodland cover • Habitat types present include: montane; dwarf shrub heath; conifer woodland; broadleaved and mixed woodland; acid grassland; fen, marsh and swamp; standing water; rivers and streams • UK BAP Species include: upland oak and birch woodland; bog woodland (largest extent in Scotland); juniper; capercaillie; black grouse; Scottish crossbill • Habitats listed under Annex 1 of EU Habitats Directive include: dry heaths; alpine and boreal heaths; sub-arctic willow scrub; siliceous alpine and boreal grasslands, Nardus grasslands; calcareous flushes • Close proximity of lowground, woodland, water, upland and montane habitats
Designated Nature Conservation Sites	• 39% of Park area designated for natural heritage • 19 SAC sites • 12 SPA sites • 46 SSSIs (some of which are of geological importance) • 3 Ramsar Sites • 6 National Nature Reserves

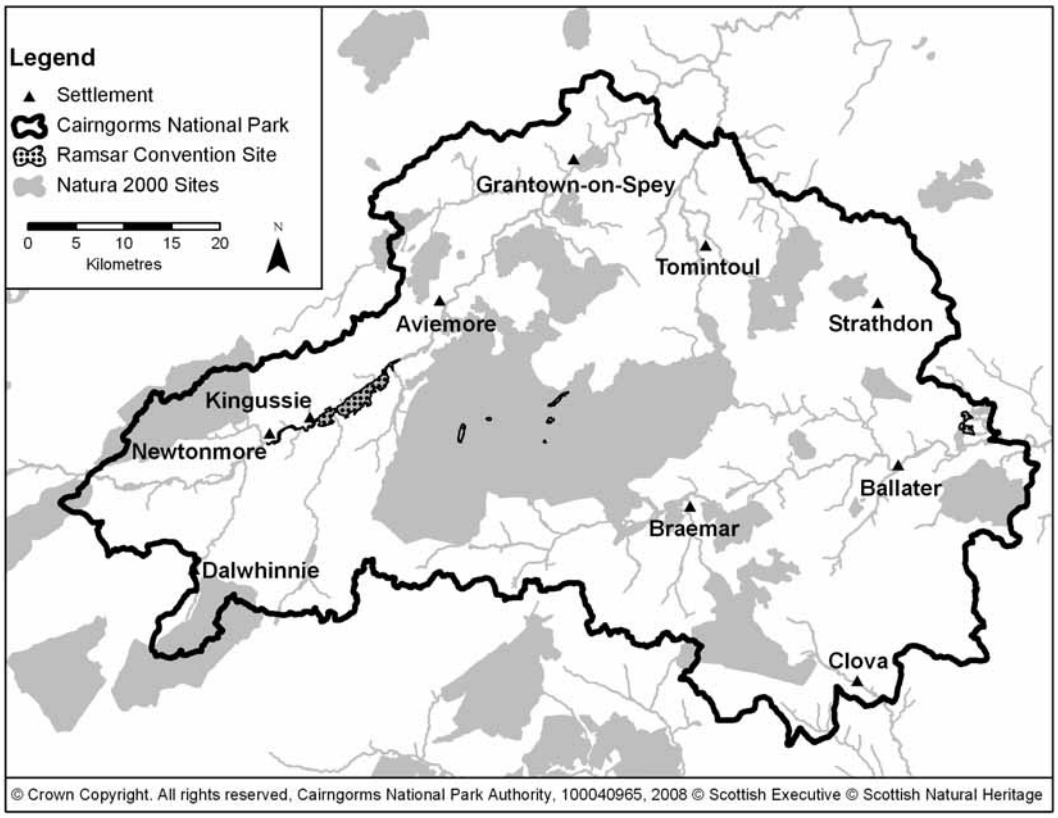
[9] State of the Park Report: Cairngorms National Park (CNPA, 2006), is available on the CNPA website or on request.

Figure 5.1 – Key baseline facts *continued*	
Resource	**Key Facts**
Soils	• 8 SSSIs with soils of international importance • 12 SSSIs with soils of national importance • High proportion of undisturbed soils (only 2% cultivated) • Podzols form 50% of soil cover including internationally significant alpine podzols on the plateau • Peat forms 13% of soil cover
Population	• 2001 Census: 16,024 people • Population density 0.04 people/Ha (lower than Scottish average) • 25.8% of population over 60 (higher than Scottish average) • Average health index in top 25% of Scotland (based on deprivation indices)
Historic Environment	• 5 designated Historic Gardens and Designed Landscapes • 60 Scheduled Ancient Monuments • 424 listed buildings • 3 Conservation Areas • 4778 records in NMRS • Large number of historic landscapes • Potential for survival of many unknown remains in upland areas

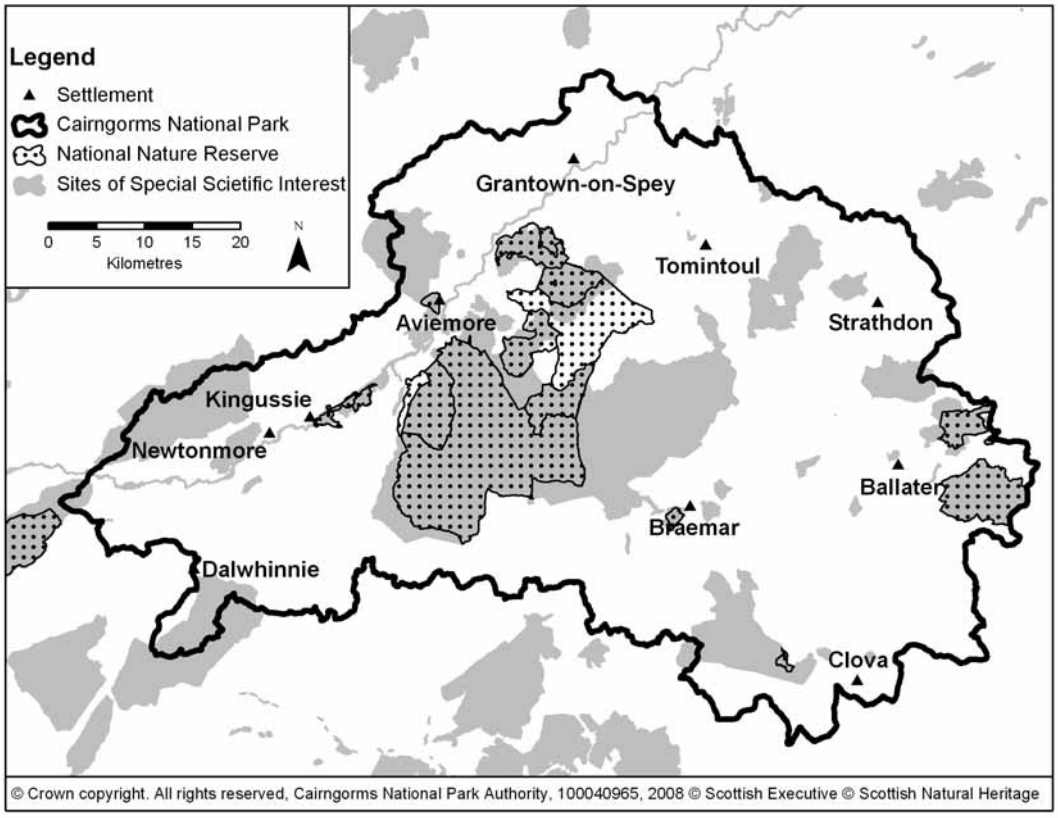
Earth Heritage Landforms and Landscape	• 2 National Scenic Areas
	• 30 GCR sites (of which some are part or all SSSI)
	• Granite massif and plateau
	• Internationally important landform record
	• Coherent identity of landscape across Park from landform and landcover
	• Land-use cover:
	  • 42% dwarf shrub heath
	  • 28% montane habitats
	  • 11% coniferous woodland
	  • 2% broadleaved/mixed woodland
	  • 3% improved grassland
	  • 0.4% built areas

Figure 5.1 – Key baseline facts *continued*	
Resource	**Key Facts**
Water	• 3,362km of running water habitat • 81% of streams classified as excellent (A1) or good (A2) (SEPA 2003) • 20 sq km standing waters • Catchments of 6 major rivers
Air	• Relatively low atmospheric pollution
Climate	• Annual precipitation over 2250mm on summits and under 900mm in straths • Average annual snow cover 200 days on summits and 50 days on low-ground • Prevailing winds from south-west
Outdoor Access	• Public right of responsible access • 49 Munros including 5 summits over 4000 feet • 3 ski centres • National Cycle Network Route 7 • 1 Long Distance Route (Speyside Way) • 179 Rights of Way • Around 40 promoted path networks • National importance for outdoor access, with significant levels of use across a wide range of activities
Energy and Infrastructure	• No significant energy generation within the Park
Built Environment	• 3 Conservation Areas • Distinctive local vernacular architecture

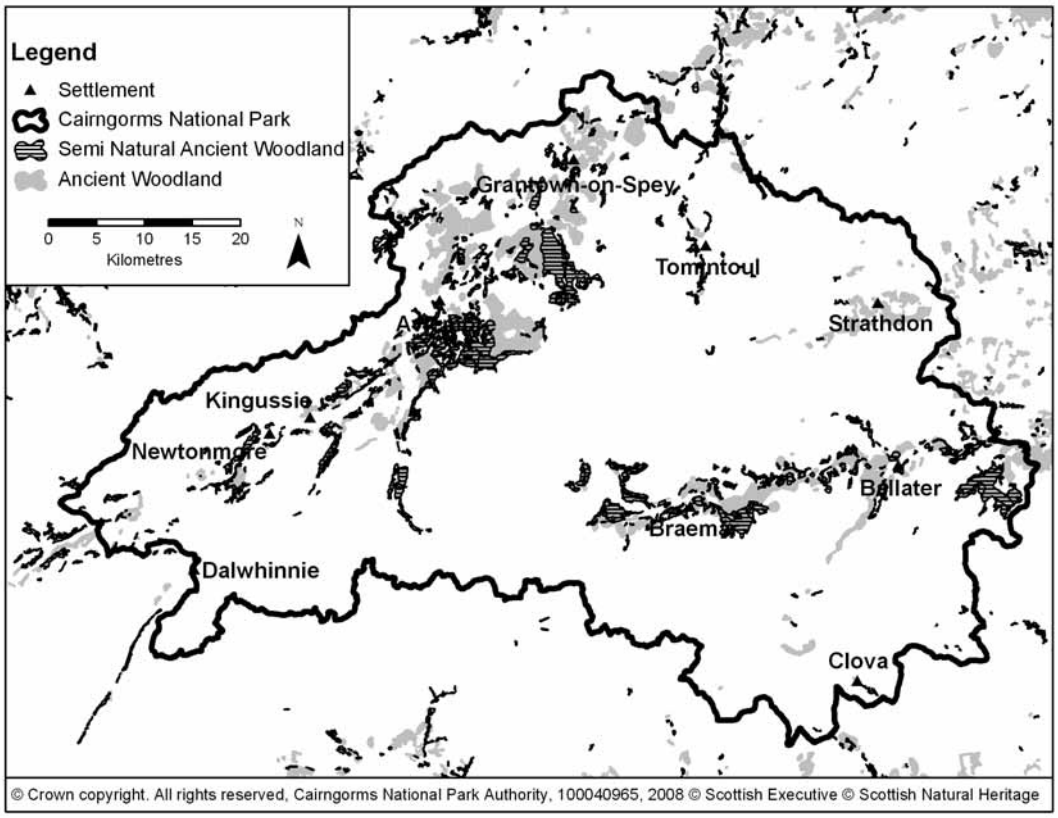
Map 5.1 – International nature conservation designations



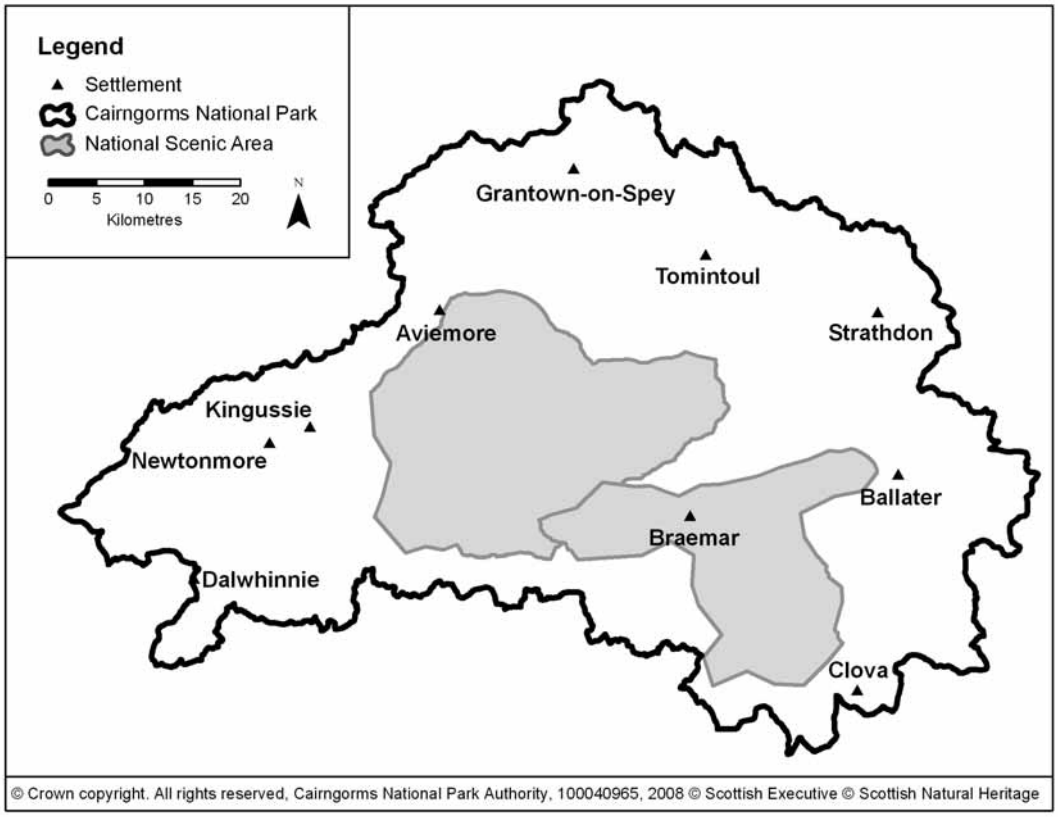
Map 5.2 – National nature conservation designations



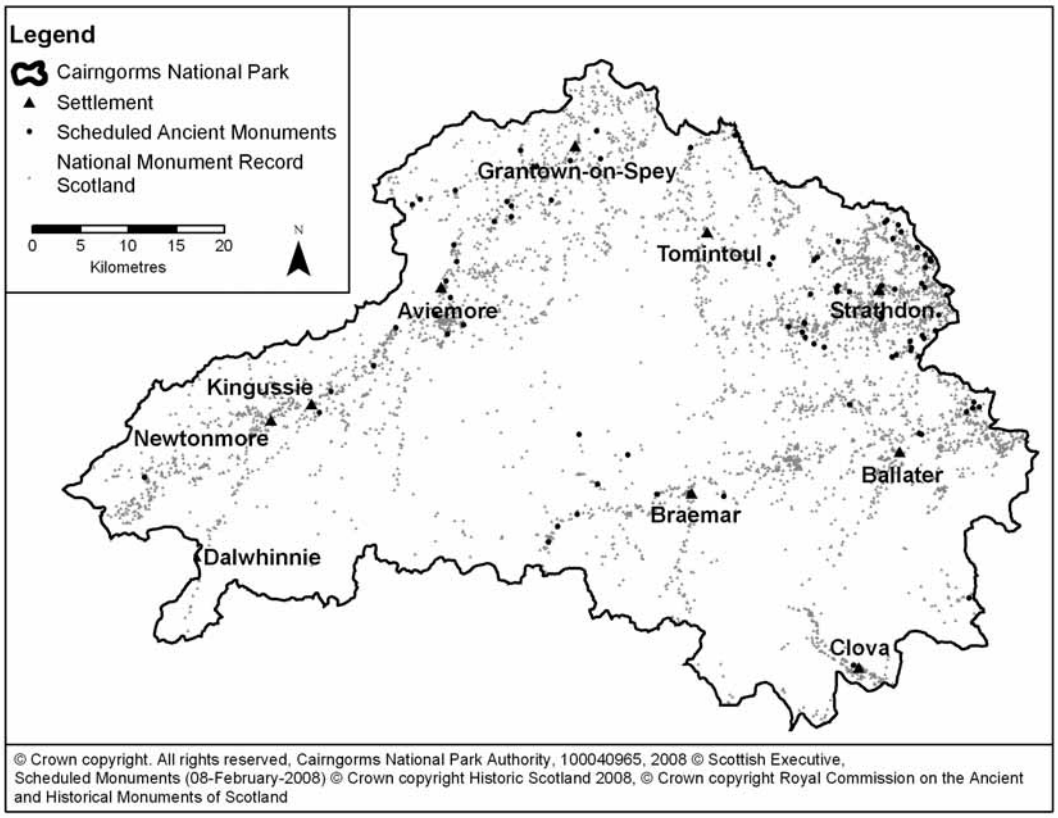
Map 5.3 – Ancient woodland sites



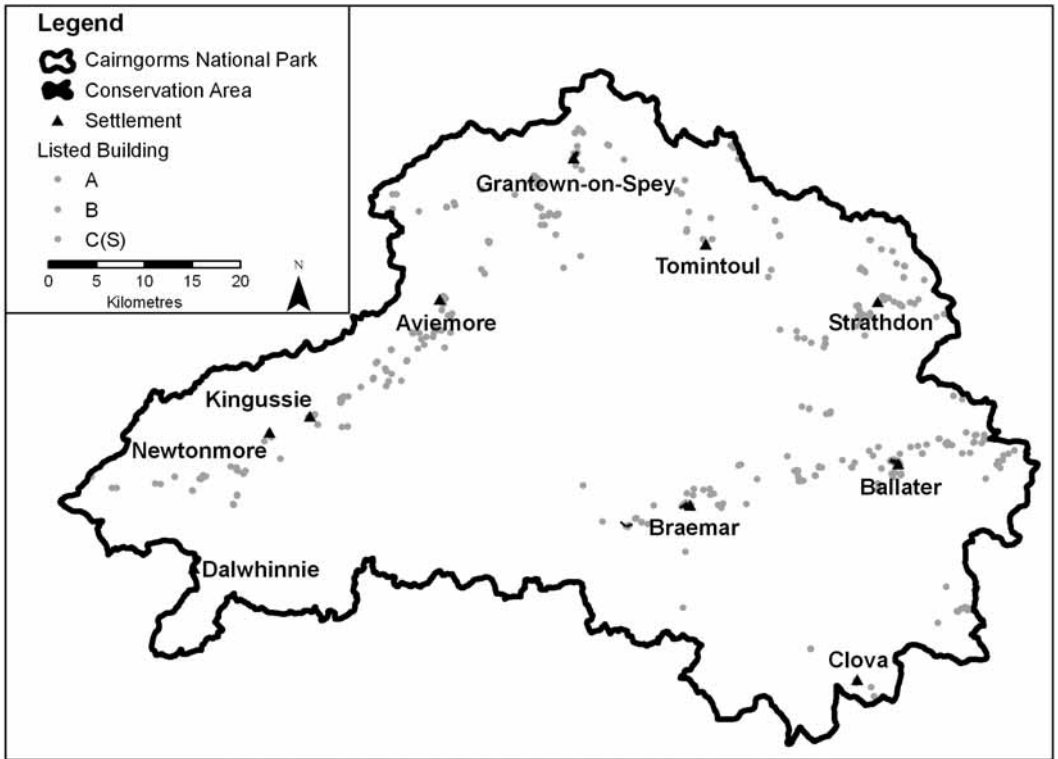
Map 5.4 – National Scenic Areas



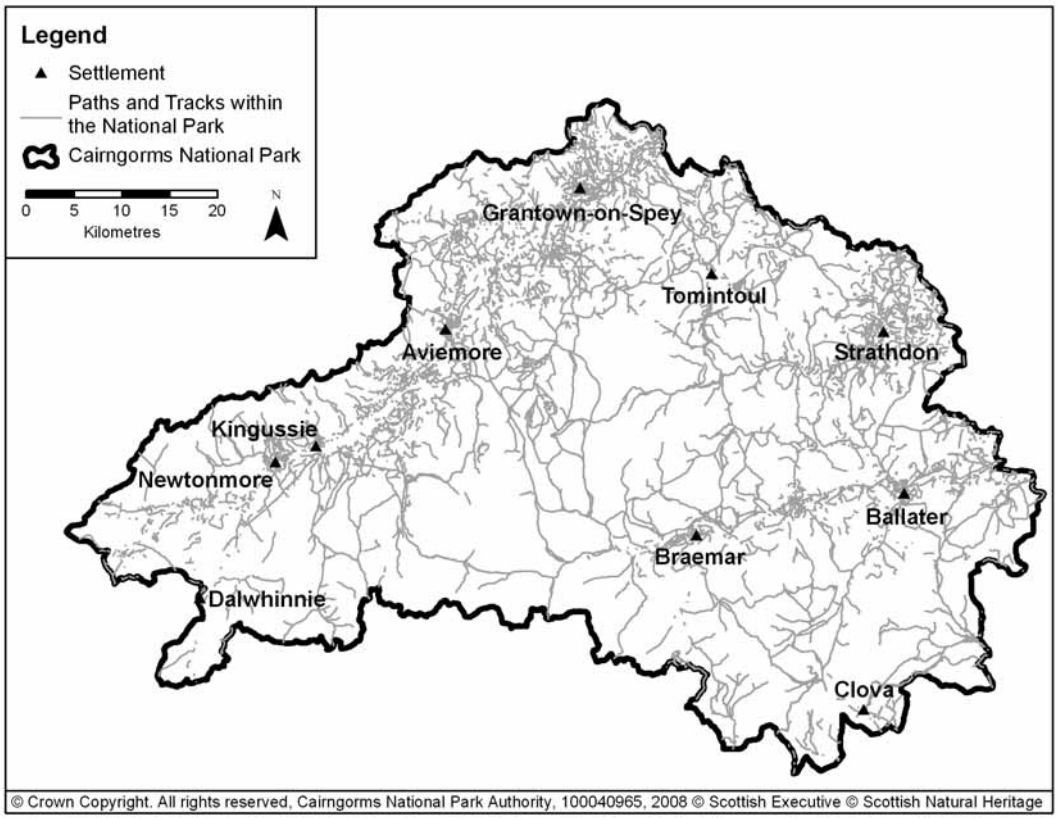
Map 5.5 – Scheduled Ancient Monuments and other monument records



Map 5.6 – Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas



Map 5.7 – Informal recreation (paths and tracks)



Environmental issues in the Cairngorms National Park

5.3 The State of the Park Report and key issues research provide information on the current trends and key issues in each environmental resource category in the Cairngorms. Figure 5.2 summarises the key trends and issues for each. Those key issues which have been identified as being within the scope of the Draft Core Paths Plan have been highlighted in bold.

Figure 5.2 – Key trends and issues in the Cairngorms

Resource	Key trends	Key issues
Biodiversity	• Some continued habitat loss, fragmentation and deterioration • Vegetation limited by grazing pressure • Continued introductions and spread of non-native species • Increase in native woodland cover	• **Ecosystem integrity and connectivity** • Impact of non-native species • **Impact of climate change** • **Impact of recreation** • **Impact of development** • Incomplete data
Designated Nature Conservation Sites	• Increasing account of external impacts to sites (Nature Conservation Act 2004) • Recent expansion of Natura 2000 designations • Review of NNR designations • Significant percentage of designated sites currently in unfavourable condition	• **Management practices** • Long-term security of management objectives • **Integration with wider land-use** • **Identification of where recreation may be contributing to unfavourable condition of sites**
Population	• Ageing population	• **Implications for community dynamics** • Implications for development patterns • Implications for human resources
Historic Environment	• Land-use change	• **Impact of new development** • Extension of forest cover • Agricultural changes from CAP reform • **Impact of visitors**
Landforms and Landscape	• Increase in woodland cover • Decline in heather moorland cover • Increase in research on landscape	• **Impact of development** • **Recreation pressure** • Connectivity of land cover • **Impacts of tracks and paths**

Figure 5.2 – Key trends and issues in the Cairngorms *continued*		
Resource	**Key trends**	**Key issues**
Landforms and Landscape continued	• Poorly designed and located built development including communications and utilities infrastructure • Poorly designed and managed forest plantations • Growing impacts of ATV tracking • Limited understanding of people's perceptions of landscape values	• Renewable energy developments • **Perceptions of 'wildness'**
Soil	• Soil erosion on higher slopes and plateaux	• **Impacts of recreation** • Lack of information on soil use and development • Grazing and trampling by herbivores
Water	• Acidification (atmospheric) • Decline in native fish stocks	• Diffuse pollution from agricultural ground • River modification • **Catchment processes and flood management** • Availability for consumption • **Impact of recreation**
Air	• Climate change - increasing temperature and precipitation expected	• **Atmospheric pollution**
Outdoor Access and Recreation	• Increasing range of outdoor recreation activities • New public right of responsible access • More managed path networks • Increased level of upland path provision and repair • Diversification of ski centres into summer activities	• **Development increasing or reducing access opportunities** • **Impact of access on habitats and species** • **Landscape impact of access infrastructure** • **Accessibility of environment for all**
Energy and Infrastructure	• Increasing demand for renewable (particularly windfarm) sites	• Potential impact of transmission pylons and windfarm developments • Use of non-renewable energy sources

Figure 5.2 – Key trends and issues in the Cairngorms *continued*		
Resource	**Key trends**	**Key issues**
Built Environment	• Abandonment or conversion of farm steadings • Significant demand for new housing	• Decay of listed buildings • **Impact of development on settlement character**

Limitations of data

5.4 The Cairngorms National Park area is one of the most closely studied geographical areas in the UK and so has a wealth of information that can be used to provide a baseline. However, a number of factors limit the value or usability of data:

- **Information is fragmented across the Park area, with some sites or areas having been more closely studied than others.** Of particular relevance to the Draft Core Paths Plan is that the wealth of information collected for one or two key recreational sites in the Park is not reflected in as comprehensive a manner for the majority of the area.
- **The formal geography of the Cairngorms National Park is a new boundary, to which data has not been collected in the past.** The Park boundary cuts across four different local authority areas, and different sections of other agencies such as Scottish Natural Heritage. This means that in the past data has often been collected for different areas using different standards and methodologies.
- **Data is held in different forms.** Some data is well suited to straightforward assessment and query, whereas others are not.

Evolution of the environment without the Draft Core Paths Plan

5.5 The Directive requires the likely evolution of the environment without the Plan to be considered. The trends identified above are expected to continue in the absence of new policy or actions to address them. In particular, a number of the issues that are related to the impacts of outdoor access and recreation are considered likely to continue in the absence of policies or action plans to address them.

5.6 The underlying purpose of the National Park designation is to integrate the management of different sectors and areas within the Park in order to take a co-ordinated approach to addressing these issues and delivering the Park aims.

5.7 The Core Paths Plan is the main tool for developing access and recreation in the Park. Without a Plan detailing core paths it is unlikely that there would be consistency in policy or delivery across the Park.