

CAIRNGORM AREA

THE Report of the Technical Group on the Cairngorm Area of the Eastern Highlands of Scotland, set up in 1962 by the Scottish Development Department, was published on March 3, 1967, by H.M. Stationery Office, price £2. The Group consisted of planning and development officers of the Department and of the five county councils concerned in the administration of the area. They considered the views of some 29 organisations interested in the area in one way or another. Climbers were represented by the Scottish Mountaineering Club. The Report comprises 78 pages of text, 6 figures, 10 plates and 6 fold-out maps detailing various features of the area.

The 1,535 square miles considered in the report cover, in addition to the Cairngorms proper, the Monadhliaths and Loch Ericht in the west, Glen Garry and Loch Errochty in the south, Glen Muick and the Lecht in the east and the Cromdale Hills and the Slochd in the north. Thus, much more is involved than the area of the high tops and isolated glens, despite the impression that might have been gained from the reviews of the Report in the popular press.

Individual chapters cover Population and Employment, Land Use, Communications and Services, Tourist Provision and Recreation, and Landscape, Conservation and Preservation. These are illustrated by the fold-out maps, showing place names, land use, estate boundaries, communications, recreation facilities, and landscape features. There are aerial photographs of the Drumochter, Carn Ban Mor, Sgoran Dubh Mor and Braeriach, Cairngorm, Beinn a' Bhuid and Glenshee snowfields taken in April 1965, together with a few rather uninformative illustrations.

The introductory chapter deals with climate, vegetation and wild life in general and provides a good over-all impression of the area, which is almost twice the size of any of the National Parks in England and Wales. It was originally largely pine and birch forest country below 2,000 feet, but a map of forest distribution shows how small an area is now under trees.

Of the 13,000 inhabitants, 65 per cent. reside in Strathspey and almost 20 per cent. in Upper Deeside, with Grantown, Ballater and Kingussie the only towns with a population of over 1,000. There was a decrease of 8.5 per cent. in the population between 1951 and

1961 : there is thus a case for measures to increase employment in the valleys, where agriculture and hotels and catering are the only occupations with over 1,000 employees. There is useful background information on ancillary industries, such as distilling, forestry and timber, in Chapter 2.

The following chapter on land use explains in some detail the problems facing the sheep farmer and forester, and considers the economics of the deer forest and the grouse moor, not forgetting the difficulties that arise when public access is unrestricted. "Another valuable contribution would be made if the public could be persuaded to keep to a comprehensive system of footpaths and bridle tracks. The paths should be clearly marked with signs or cairns as appropriate ; some could take the form of nature trails with suitably located hides for observing the wild life."

After a summary of the present communications of the area, an ambitious array of new roads is proposed. These include that perennial, the Glen Feshie Road—now to be "... a major trans-Scotland route linking the east and west coast ports of Aberdeen and Mallaig ...". And this through a nature reserve ! This road, with an 18-foot carriageway, which seems narrow for such a modern major traffic artery likely to be subject to severe icing conditions, "will cost not less than £2,000,000 at current prices". The method of statement of the cost is interesting : one is left with the feeling that the figure is certainly not an over-estimate.

The other new roads considered of primary importance are an access road to Coire na Ciste on Cairngorm and two roads to Beinn a' Bhuid, via Glen Lui and the Clais Fhearnaig and via Glen Quoich, into the glen of Alltan na Beinne, where skiable snow is available on the upper slopes until May. The Secretary of State for Scotland is understood to have said that these Beinn a' Bhuid roads costing at least £700,000, would, if built, be the responsibility of the county authorities, not of the government.

Roads suggested for future consideration include one to Lurcher's Gully on Cairn Lochan, one from Nethy Bridge to Glen More—a route possibly warranting greater priority as the tracks are even now occasionally passable and serve a useful purpose without penetrating into remote unspoiled country—a 16-mile road from Tomintoul via Inchrory to Cairndavon and Glen Gairn and finally a Glen Tilt road. These would cost at least £2.6 million as single tracks with passing places.

The longest chapter is that dealing with Tourist Provision and

Recreation ; of it almost half is concerned with skiing, as winter sports are seen to be essential to the growth of local employment and prosperity. It is considered that climbers "will never create any considerable demand for facilities, accommodation and evening entertainment, and will always remain a minority of the winter visitors to the Area. They are unlikely to expect more than reasonable right of access to the hills and the creation of more refuge huts." One wonders how "reasonable" should be interpreted and whether there is a real demand for countless refuge huts amongst organised climbers.

It is interesting to read that "the granite (of the Cairngorms) is poor compared with the volcanic rocks of Glencoe, Ben Nevis and the Cuillins". Most climbers surely prefer the plutonic gabbros and granites of these areas to their volcanic basalts, felsites and trachytes.

The section on ski-runs provides information on the more suitable snow slopes in the area. These are largely corrie and gully runs and are generally given reasonably appropriate designations, but occasional popular names have crept in, as they already have for some rock climbs. It is to be hoped, however, that such spellings as Fiacle for Fiacaill do not persist—not to mention Cupar Angus. The Braeriach also rings somewhat strange, but may be justified.

The problem in ski development is the provision of easy access and evening relaxation. Car parks accommodating 2,000 cars at one centre are being considered, with several ski-lifts and ski-tows carrying nearly 1,000 people per hour. There was a ten-fold increase in lift and tow utilisation over the three seasons 1962-3 to 1964-5, and saturation of the presently available snow-slopes is envisaged. It is for this reason, in addition to providing a wider selection of slopes, that road access to Coire na Ciste and Lurcher's Gully in the west and Beinn a' Bhuid in the east is contemplated. For all other frequenters of the hills there is much to be said in favour of concentrating down-hill skiing and related activities in a few localised areas ; fortunately modern skiers themselves seem to be gregarious people.

For the walker, the Report recommends footpaths through the main passes, with routes (footpaths in the summary !) from them to the mountain summits, together with additional refuge huts. In this section the Report is not quite so ambitious regarding Glen Feshie : two footbridges should be built across tributaries of the Feshie west of the River Eidart. It is recognised that at the upper

levels little conflict exists between walkers and other interests. The implication is that some regulation is to be enforced at lower levels, yet it is just at these levels, and not in the rugged Central Cairngorms, that practice of the sport of orienteering—the modern form of route-finding by map and compass—is to be encouraged, with the agreement of the landowners.

Other activities which it is thought might be developed in the hills include pony-trekking, while in the valleys recreations considered were angling, sailing and boating, canoeing, water-skiing, swimming, golf, tennis, bowls, organised games, gliding, motor sports, ski-jumping, curling, skating and even ice-yachting. But it is not suggested that all can make a practical contribution to the development of the area, or are practicable at all.

Members of the Club will be particularly interested in suggestions concerned with the eastern side of the area. It is not considered that major hotel developments are required: adequate additional accommodation for skiers could in the first instance be obtained by hotels in the area remaining open in the winter. An Outdoor Training Centre similar to that at Glenmore, and a youth hostel, are envisaged in the Derry Lodge neighbourhood. In general, however, the major developments are thought to be most appropriately located in the Spey Valley.

Chapter Six attempts to detail landscape features with a Baedeker-like allocation of stars, and goes on to discuss a code for the control of development. It also includes a list of buildings of archæological, historical and architectural interest in the area.

Finally, the various proposals are summarised and an estimation of the cost of all the projects set out in the Report given. It amounts to no less a sum than £34·71 million. This is no inconsiderable amount of money, and all members of the Cairngorm Club should read and digest the Report carefully. It is a document whose implications are, in your Editor's opinion, well worth detailed study as it, despite minor shortcomings, presents a clear idea of the thoughts of professional planners regarding an area which is as yet practically unspoiled. Its future may now be in the balance.