

A CRITICAL TIME FOR THE CAIRNGORMS

CHARLES GIMMINGHAM

The next few years will be a period of the utmost importance for the future of the Cairngorms. The Cairngorms Working Party has submitted its report 'Common Sense and Sustainability' (1992), and at the time of writing the Secretary of State for Scotland is considering his response. Whatever we may think of the administrative mechanism proposed – and opinions differ widely – the fact remains that the Report offers, in outline, a management strategy for the Cairngorm area that could be of great significance if ways and means are found to implement it. However, to put flesh on the bones of that outline and to turn it into a practical programme to secure the future of this magnificent and precious part of Scotland's 'natural heritage' will require a suite of decisions that, to succeed, must be soundly based on the best ecological, social and economic information available.

Members of the Cairngorm Club may therefore be interested to know of a project that is under way to gather the results of research relating to the Cairngorms, and to use them to establish a solid foundation of knowledge on which decision making can be firmly based. Upwards of 20 scientists, land economists and managers are collaborating in the project, the outcome of which will be a publication planned for the end of 1994. The time is ripe for an effort of this kind: there are so many different interests, some of them conflicting, among those who own, use, manage, live or visit the area that it is hardly surprising that it has often been at the centre of fierce controversy. On the other hand, because this is one of the finest and certainly the most extensive uninterrupted area of upland natural and semi-natural ecosystems in Britain, it has provided the location for many important ecological and socio-economic studies. There is now an excellent opportunity to explore the implications of these investigations in setting objectives for future management and, as far as possible, achieving reconciliation of the various interests in the use of the land.

The aim will be, first, to set out the scientific, ecological background of information which is the essential foundation for understanding the area, establishing clearly why it is of such special importance and identifying those features which are the vital elements of our 'heritage'. Building on this, a number of key issues involving land use and management will be examined. Finally, an integrated approach to the formulation of options for the future, will be based on the principle of ecological sustainability, will be attempted.

Admirable accounts of the natural history of the Cairngorms are already available – notably Desmond Nethersole-Thompson and Adam Watson's book "The Cairngorms" (1974). Our project will not be trespassing on that ground, for its distinctive purpose is to review relevant research and seek to identify the main factors which are responsible for the present condition of the

landscape, vegetation, fauna and environment of the area. Particular attention will be given to the processes of change which have operated in the past and are taking place today, both on the low ground and at high altitudes, and to the principles which should determine the future status and administration of the territory. The needs of those who live and work in the area, as well as visitors from far and near, will be addressed in the context of a conservation plan.

Recent studies of geology, geomorphology and climate will be used to highlight important aspects of the physical environment and set stage for a discussion of the terrestrial ecology (plant communities, bird, mammal and insect populations, etc.) and of the aquatic and sub-aquatic ecosystems (rivers, lochs, marshes, bogs, etc.). Key issues to be taken up include past and present land use, the surviving examples of native woodlands and their future, forestry, agriculture, sporting interests (deer, grouse, moorland management), recreation and tourism, conservation of nature and landscape. Examples of past conflicts and their resolution will be examined in order to draw attention to lessons that should be learned from them. The selection of ecologically-sound objectives for future management and the means of putting them into practice will be the focus of the forward look.

It is hoped that the project, when completed, will make a constructive and timely contribution towards resolving conflict and reaching conclusions which are both realistic and ecologically acceptable. The conservation of a highly-sensitive area, recognised internationally, nationally and locally as of the highest importance, is the overall theme.

References:

Cairngorms Working Party. (1992). Common sense and sustainability, a partnership for the Cairngorms. The Scottish Office, Edinburgh.

Nethersole-Thompson, D. and Watson, A. (1974). The Cairngorms, their natural history and scenery. Collins, London.

