

## THE FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF THE CAIRNGORMS

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On 8 November 1994 the Scottish Office made public a Statement of Intent by the Secretary of State entitled "Cairngorms Partnership". This long-awaited statement set out the government's proposals for a new management regime for the Cairngorms, following on from the initiative taken in March 1991 in setting up the Cairngorms Working Party. It is too soon to appraise the success or otherwise of the new management regime, but this article seeks to record the views which the Club put forward and the manner in which it did so through submissions to the Cairngorms Working Party and other quarters.

There had of course been suggestions for many years, from both private and public sources, that something should be done to ensure that the unique qualities of the Cairngorms were recognised and protected, and that their oversight, instead of being fragmented amongst several local authorities, might be entrusted to some more specific forum. There had been an official suggestion made some sixty years before by the Addison Committee of creating a Cairngorms National Park, and just over ten years after that the Ramsay Committee made the same recommendation. In February 1989 The Countryside Commission for Scotland, which was then the government's statutory adviser on countryside matters, was given the remit to "study management arrangements for popular mountain areas such as the Cairngorms, taking into consideration the case for arrangements along national park lines". They produced a report "The Mountain Areas of Scotland: Conservation and Management" in September 1990. This recommended wide-ranging measures for the management of upland Scotland, including the establishment of national parks in the Cairngorms and three other areas of special importance. Between the commissioning and publication of this report, the government had introduced the Natural Heritage (Scotland) Bill, which proposed natural heritage areas as a new form of protection. It may be wondered whether this was a move to ensure that the government would have an alternative to national parks, if it found itself under pressure to institute them. In any event the publication of the Mountain Areas Report was followed by a period of public consultation and by the publication on 25 February 1991 of the findings of that consultation, which included considerable support for the national park proposals. This in turn was promptly followed on 19 March 1991 by the Secretary of State for Scotland's announcement that he was establishing the Cairngorms Working Party. Around the same time there were other changes on the way. In November 1990 the government announced its intention to propose the Cairngorms for World Heritage Site status. 1 April 1991 was the date when Nature Conservancy Council Scotland became separated from the previously national Nature Conservancy Council. The Natural Heritage (Scotland) Act received royal assent in June 1991, and the

Countryside Commission for Scotland was merged with Nature Conservancy Council Scotland to become Scottish Natural Heritage in April 1992.

The remit of the Cairngorms Working Party was, in general terms, to consider current land and land use practices in the Cairngorms area, and to recommend to the Secretary of State for Scotland an integrated management plan consistent with the importance of the natural heritage of the Cairngorms, the need to assure social and economic benefits to local people, land users and those who invest in the land, and the value of the Cairngorms for recreational purposes. The Working Party was to comprise sixteen members who together were representative of all relevant interests, and to be assisted by panels of technical assessors. It was to be chaired by Magnus Magnusson as Chairman of the Countryside Commission for Scotland and Chairman-Designate of Scottish Natural Heritage. Its other members included a reasonable number of persons representative of environmental and recreational interests, which the Club could align itself with, and indeed included one Club member, John Duff of Braemar, chosen however for his credentials as an active member of the Braemar community, not as a Club member.

Very soon after its establishment the Working Party issued a Mission Statement setting out its basic objectives and how it meant to tackle them. In December 1991 it issued a fuller public statement, recording what it had done to date and how it intended to continue, in particular what it planned in the way of public consultation. Before the Club had been formally invited to make any sort of representations, informal contact with John Duff led to a suggestion that we should make our views known to the Working Party, and as an initial step in this direction, we provided John with copies which he could forward at his discretion of other submissions which the Club had made in the recent past about the same or related topics, namely submissions to the CCS in May 1989 about the national parks issue, the account which appeared in the 1983 issue of this Journal of the Club's efforts in regard to the Lurcher's Gully controversy, and the Club's submissions in 1989 and 1990 in regard to the Highland Regional Council Structure Plan Review. It was gratifying to find that many of these submissions had been prepared in such a way that they were capable of conveying a fairly comprehensive impression of our views on the issues which the Working Party was concerned with.

The contact with John Duff led to a more positive opportunity to contribute to the Working Party's deliberations. The Club was invited to have two or three of its members attend a meeting of the Working Party in Braemar on 24 April 1992, devoted to receiving input on recreation and access issues. Before this meeting the Club's Environmental Issues Sub-Committee had met on a couple of occasions, and we had together compiled a set of written submissions which I had submitted to the Working Party at the beginning of April 1992. These submissions reiterated much of what we had copied to John Duff, though with material and opinions added more pertinent to the remit of the

Working Party. In particular we urged that the scenic and wildness qualities of the Cairngorms could be protected only if there were an integrated management approach over a sufficiently extensive area; we suggested that on the north of the Dee everything from the Feshie (if not the A9) in the west to at least Morven in the east should be included and that on the south everything from the Tilt (or perhaps the A9) to beyond Glen Muick or perhaps even to Mount Battock should be included; we advocated that the northern flanks of Cairn Gorm, around Rothiemurchus and Abernethy and the southern flanks of the south Deeside hills, thus including the Angus glens, should be embraced. We also urged that over such an extensive area, there would have to be different but complementary management policies for the summit plateaux and the corries and glens within the core area, the valleys which had no public roads, the valleys which did have public roads, and the locations of actual towns and villages. We urged that the reliance on "the voluntary principle" which the Working Party's terms of reference set much store by should be supplemented by fall-back legislation, and perhaps most importantly we urged that whatever was set up should have sufficient resources and should be implemented speedily.

The others invited to make presentations at the meeting on 23 April were John McKay of Scottish Natural Heritage along with Eric Langmuir (who was a member of the Working Party as well as being on this occasion a submitter of evidence), and Eric Baird, the Ranger from Glen Tanar (who was able to provide information on how access and environmental problems were tackled elsewhere in Northern Europe). The Club was represented by Gill Shirreffs (then Club President), Eddie Martin (immediate Past-President), and myself. We agreed that Gill and Eddie should speak on particular topics and that I would field the questions. We were entertained to lunch with members of the Working Party (being none too sure in some cases who amongst those that we were chatting with were likely to be "on our side") and then proceeded to the session of submissions.

Gill was surprised to find that she was the only female in the whole group. We received a fair hearing and were satisfied that the effort which we made was worthwhile. I have always felt that it is one of the strengths of the Club in contexts such as this, that it can show that it is not a group with narrow sectional interests but has a large and diverse membership, has a history of over 100 years, and has throughout this time taken an active and responsible interest in matters scientific, ecological and environmental; though our links with these are in one sense external to our proper activities, they add to our weight and credibility. Amongst other things we sought to emphasise that we as a club have always had a good rapport with estates, and that we thought there was ample scope for reducing or eliminating conflicts between recreational interests and land management interests, if the former could be encouraged to seek information about estate activities (and told where it was to be found) and estate managers could be encouraged to avoid problems for



themselves by being more forthcoming with information. These comments seemed to be well received.

Although they were still consulting, the Working Party had evidently by this time begun to formulate views, and on 29 May 1992 they issued a consultation paper and announced that they planned to hold a series of seminars to allow consultees to discuss particular issues at separate sessions. The Environmental Issues Sub-Committee was convened to consider the consultation paper, and Gill, Eddie and I attended the Aviemore seminar on recreation and access. This afforded us less opportunity for saying anything useful, and a large proportion of those attending seemed quite hostile to the sorts of outcomes that we hoped might be achieved; it was noticeable and frustrating how many speakers seemed to think that the Working Party was a Cairngorm Working Party, not a Cairngorms Working Party.

A further set of submissions to the Working Party was finalised on the basis of the deliberations of the sub-committee and our experiences at the Aviemore seminar, and these were forwarded on 25 June 1992. They were much more specific than the earlier general submissions. When necessary they expressed concerns about points which we disagreed with or points which we felt were inadequately provided for in the consultation paper. In part they amounted to simple statements of support for some of the proposals, so that, if there should be any simplistic counting of views for and against, there should be no question of the sensible proposals losing out because supporters failed to express a view whereas opponents did so.

There must at this time have been some indication that a definitive report was to be expected quite soon, as my covering letter for these submissions ended "We all await eagerly the publication of the definitive report later in the summer". The Working Party's official secretary also seemed to rate this as a possibility, as her acknowledgement referred to a report being submitted to the Secretary of State in the autumn. However, the report, in the form of a veritable book comprising 112 pages of main text and another 69 pages of annexes and 7 pages of plans, was not ready for submission to the Secretary of State until late December 1992 and not published until early April 1993. This of course was not an end of the exercise but the beginning of its next stage. The Secretary of State was now inviting comments on the report to allow him to come to a conclusion.

In many respects those of us who considered the Working Party's report on behalf of the Club welcomed it. It expressed support for many elements which we had considered to be important, and it recommended that they be applied over a wide geographical extent (as wide as the Club could reasonably have hoped for), meaning that watersheds, which had for so long formed boundaries between administrative zones, might cease to be important in that regard. The element which we found most disappointing was the conclusion about how the Working Party's general recommendations should be implemented. We believed that the dissenting view of two of the Board's

members, Eric Langmuir and John Hunt, which was set out as Annex 10 to the report, and a presentation of the Scottish Council for National Parks, which was reproduced as Annex 9, and which were broadly similar, both advocating national parks or something very similar as the administrative vehicle for delivering a new management strategy, were to be preferred to the majority recommendation of the establishment of a Cairngorms Partnership and corresponding Partnership Board. Our main reason was that too much reliance was placed on what might be achieved by the "voluntary principle".

After due consideration of the report we wrote to the Secretary of State for Scotland on 29 June 1993 setting out our thoughts, these running to three pages of general comment and two and a half pages of statements of specific support for or opposition to individual recommendations in the report. Amongst our criticisms we voiced the views (a) that a Partnership Board would not be enough to result in six district councils and three regional councils acting consistently and positively towards the furtherance of the Partnership's objective, (b) that the Working Party was in error in thinking that the areas north and south of the actual Cairngorms could not be a cohesive economic, social and cultural unit if once given a management regime which treated them as such, (c) that we did not believe that the voluntary principle could deliver what was expected of it if the only last resort power available were compulsory purchase, (d) that the suggested level of additional funding from central government was inadequate and (e) that the weak administrative structure suggested was insufficient to support the hoped-for World Heritage Site status. We concluded our general submissions with the suggestion - "The goal should be a management regime for the Cairngorms such that anyone reflecting on the history of the Cairngorms in 2050 will think of 1993 or 1994 as a turning point". I hope that if matters do not work out as one might hope, some readers of this Journal in 50 years time will remind the Scottish Office that they were warned.

After the expiry of the consultation period, time passed. And more time passed. At some point an ill-informed or insufficiently cautious member of the Scottish Office's Environment Department indicated in response to prodding that the Secretary of State's response was expected "in about a month's time". More than once after this it was still expected "in about a month's time". By September 1994, when the Cairngorm Chairlift Company submitted their planning application for their funicular proposal, a decision was still expected "next month", though officials were now saying this in print. The Club's final "next month" letter was received in late October 1994 and great was the disbelief when the Secretary of State's publication "Cairngorms Partnership" made its appearance on 8 November 1994 - printed (as revealed by reading against the light to see what was below the Tippex and overstick label) as long before that as June 1994.

The Secretary of State's decision was, by and large, to adopt the

recommendations of the Cairngorms Working Party and to establish a Cairngorms Partnership (the members of which would be the relevant local authorities and various other interested authorities such as the Forestry Commission and Water Boards) and a Partnership Board (the members of which, under the chair of Mr. David Laird, would be nominees of local authorities and representatives (selected by the Chairman or by the Secretary of State) of relevant interest groups, including, fortunately, recreational and other environmental interest groups.

On reading the "Cairngorms Partnership" my predominant impression was that the contents were a step forward, albeit not exactly what we would have liked. I thought however that it would be an interesting exercise to prepare an abstract of its positive statements as distinct from gloss and padding. This left me concerned at how little the positive content amounted to; in particular there was no promise of additional funding from central government (SNH and local government being expected to contribute whatever was needed), and the Partnership Board, however well its members might work together, would still have to devise the management strategy which had been the Scottish Office's avowed ultimate objective in setting up of the Cairngorms Working Party. Nevertheless the way forward was now determined and it seemed better to work with it than to argue that better could have been done.

The Secretary of State selected a chairman for the Partnership Board - Mr. David Laird, a member of SNH and a solicitor with estate management connections - and left it to him to select, in consultation, the other members of the Board. The Club made contact with Mr. Laird about the likelihood of nominations from the Aberdeen area and was invited to make a nomination; we also made contact with the North East Mountain Trust and the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, agreeing that we should all feel free to make independent nominations. The Committee hoped that Peter Howgate would allow his name to go forward as an ambassador of the recreational interest with years of experience of debates of matters environmental, but he preferred not to. With considerable misgivings as to the possible time commitment I then allowed my name to be put forward. We learned that the NEMT were nominating their chairman Roger Owen and the MCofS were nominating Helen Geddes of the "Save the Cairngorms" campaign. Eventually, on 19 April 1995, the membership of the Partnership Board was announced and found to be much to the Club's satisfaction. The members were to include the two last named individuals and also our own member Adam Watson (chosen of course for his personal renown) and our footpath project adviser Bob Aitken. All in all there was as good a representation of the recreational/conservation interest as we could have hoped for.

The Partnership and Partnership Board have evidently worked hard since April 1995, though maintaining as yet a relatively low profile. The Club has recently received copies of all of the Board's minutes up to mid-April 1996 and a list of all the papers which the Board had by then considered, all

indicative of a vast amount of work. A first issue of a Board Newsletter made its appearance in April 1996. At the time of this article being written the awaited Management Strategy still has to be finalised and published, but it is scheduled for later in 1996 and may have been published by the time of issue of this Journal. It is perhaps disappointing that the Management Strategy has not appeared in time to be of assistance in the evaluation of the Cairngorm Chairlift Company's funicular proposals, but the Partnership Board is scarcely to be blamed for not producing in 15 months something which had been under discussion in other quarters for the previous 45 months. What we must ensure is that the undoubted efforts of the Partnership Board do bear acceptable fruit, and if there is any doubt about this coming to pass the responsible politicians, both national and local, must be taken to task.

