



THE MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL OF SCOTLAND

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23/8/10

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Visitor Management Plan Consultation

Dear Mr Whitaker

Please accept these comments from the Mountaineering Council of Scotland (MCofS). The MCofS is the representative body for hill walkers, climbers and ski tourers, and is the only national representative body of the sport of mountaineering in Scotland. We have 10,500 members, and are recognised by the Scottish Government as representing the interests of all mountaineers. Mountaineers contribute approximately £150 million to Scotland's rural economy each year and are attracted to Scotland where there are mountains, crags or a relatively wild experience. The MCofS supports rural economic activity that is sensitive to the landscape, biodiversity and wild land qualities.

The VMP is now 10 years old, over which time there has been much change in the circumstances, monitoring and alterations to the functioning of activities at Cairngorm Mountain. The MCofS therefore welcomes this timely consultation. Our first observation regarding the VMP is that it has not functioned as a "plan," but a statement of possibilities. Some actions have not been taken, such as car parking arrangements. Some actions have been taken but are not in the VMP e.g. permission for down-only tickets and the Walk@theTop. Whether these developments, or lack of, are positive or negative are not so much the issue, but the VMP does not sufficiently describe what was to happen and intended timescales as other management plans generally do. The MCofS strongly encourage a re-writing of the VMP in a more precise, time-specific way such that there is a plan for the future of all visitor management activities. Built into this should be a programme of regular review to enable changes to be made in an open and accountable manner. Inclusion of activities not directly connected with the "closed system," but still visitor management, would make for a more coherent document, and would logically include plans such as for the mountain bike trail. Additionally, it may be appropriate to considering consulting on a re-write of the VMP after there has been an opportunity to present the results of monitoring that has been carried out for the past 10 years. This approach would promote understanding and reasoning behind the VMP detail.

Car park charges (section 1.7) are a very sensitive topic for access users, especially where there is a long-established expectation of free parking. This is due to the potential for confusion between paying for a service and paying for access. This is particularly the case where effectively there is no alternative and the road access and car park are publicly owned. Currently public transport options are not particularly mountaineer-friendly due to timings and lack of a convenient car park in Aviemore, so there is no real viable alternative to Coire Cas or Ciste car parks. Experience at other popular hill walking car parks where payment has been introduced show that compliance with apparently compulsory charges may not be any greater than the process being a voluntary system. This includes locations where revenue was used for path work and visitor management benefit, and interpretation to this effect is displayed at the car park. This is the case even when charges are at a reasonable level such as £2. Higher charges are likely to result in even lower compliance.

Enforcement may increase compliance but would hugely increase costs of collection, quite possibly by more than the revenue.

Of particular concern regarding car parking is the statement regarding possible closure of Coire na Ciste and Sugar Bowl car parks (8.6). This would cause significant problems for mountaineers. The Sugar Bowl gives access to the Allt Mor Trail and the path that has received significant investment that follows the line from here to the Chalamain Gap. Currently there is no realistic alternative. Similarly Coire na Ciste is of importance for access to Strath Nethy and a route to Cairngorm via Cnap Coire na Spreidhe for those that do not wish to walk through the ski development area.

A number of trials of alterations to the “closed system” have been undertaken, and in the case of the down-only tickets has now become part of the established system. The priority of protection of the European sites (2.6) must remain the purpose of the “closed system.” Although the signatories of the S50 agreement are consulted on alterations, this does not appear to many mountaineers as an open and accountable process.

There is significant wariness amongst mountaineers of CML, and partly for this reason, MCofS believes that the VMP should be a specific plan for the future, and open to consultation at regular reviews, as occurs for National Nature Reserves.

Please do not hesitate to contact me to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely

Hebe Carus (Ms)
Access & Conservation Officer