

Go tell it on the Mountain

CairnGorm Mountain opened their visitor centre, and a funicular railway up one of Scotland's most famous mountain ranges, in difficult times. The railway itself was controversial, and so were the management arrangements, which do not allow passengers outside a small area at the Ptarmigan, the top station. Five years on, Jim Cornfoot explores how interpretation has become a core part of the company's work, and how it is shaping its future.

CairnGorm Mountain is owned entirely by a charitable trust with a simple goal: to support the local community by offering an exceptional mountain experience in a sustainable way.

The company is one of Scotland's largest Social Enterprises, and is continuing to diversify its product away from mono-cultural and climate-dependant recreational activities (such as skiing and snowboarding), to a wider and more secure base that capitalises on the organisation's inherent asset: the mountain itself. This shift has placed interpretation at the very heart of the organisation's strategic intent.

The current interpretive proposition is based on the simple premise that Cairn Gorm is a special place that has the potential to instil respect for Nature's scale, beauty and power. Above all it has the potential to make us question our human place as a part of the environment, in both a local and global context. To this end products and services contain physical, sensory, aesthetic, psychological, cultural and spiritual aspects that aim to inspire a passion for Nature, and a desire to live environmentally sustainable lives.

The process of creating the first interpretive plan involved a partnership with key stakeholders and external consultant support, and took place prior to opening the new facilities in 2000. This work guided the development of the main exhibition in the Ptarmigan building. At the time, although other interpretive opportunities existed, the exhibition was perceived as the single most tangible product – an 'added value element' - that could be marketed to potential visitors to the funicular.

Further interpretive projects were identified to both offset disappointment about the restricted egress from the Ptarmigan building, and to educate visitors about the mountain's many conservation designations - and therefore the reasons for access restrictions. These projects included an all-abilities footpath, interpretive panels depicting the incredible views from the Ptarmigan, and a new Mountain Garden. The garden lets visitors experience some of the most important habitats and indigenous plants of the Cairngorm Mountains in a highly inclusive way - without the need to venture far into the often harsh mountain environment.

CairnGorm Mountain rapidly became the third most popular paid non-city visitor attraction in Scotland, and the most popular paid visitor attraction in the Cairngorms National Park. The change from ski area to year-round attraction, in an

environmentally fragile site, became the catalyst for a shift in staff culture. The team became much more customer focused, and more environmentally aware. These changes were rewarded with Hospitality Assured accreditation and a gold Green Tourism Award. The company now uses the 'Triple Bottom Line' principle, where economic, social and environmental criteria are all included when measuring success.

These shifts in business emphasis have resulted in the engagement of a full-time Ecologist, a Sustainability Consultant, and a full-time Interpretive Coordinator. This has led to a more cohesive approach to interpretation, with a cross-company interpretation group meeting monthly to examine all projects and ensure they meet the organisation's goals at a strategic level.

We see these changes continuing in future: our long-term strategy is to become ecologically sustainable and to make education for sustainability the prime operational objective. Staff have already visited the Eden Project, and in the late autumn will be going to the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales. Both these visits are helping the CairnGorm Mountain team learn from established providers about making education for sustainability a core product for our customers.

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A mere literary man is a dull man; a man who is solely a man of business is a selfish man; but when literature and commerce are united, they make a respectable man.

Samuel Johnson