

Visit to Aviemore and Cairngorm National Park

December 06

Background:

This visit was arranged through Fran Cree, as a follow on from the “Green Tourism” day at Poolewe. The object of the game was to see how a variety of small businesses in that area were coping with a combination of the (relatively) new National Park, and what they were doing for the area in environmental terms – in the eyes of nearly all visitors to that area, the description “National Park” carries an image of a healthy and clean environment. So how are the Cairngorms coping with all of this?

The contact at the Aviemore end was Sally Dowden, of Speyside Wildlife (all web addresses at the end of the article). Sally arranged a really excellent itinerary for us all – all visits ran to schedule, we were fed and watered along the way, and were only once subjected to gale force winds and rain! (*this was nearly 4000ft up, so there was an excuse!*)

In order then.....

Speyside Wildlife:

The business has been established now for some 17 years, and offers wildlife watching holiday packages not only in the Cairngorm area, but literally across the planet – Russia, Antarctica, Europe, USA etc. They are deeply focused on customer care as a key value, and the attention to detail is reflected in the fact that they have no less than 70% repeat custom on a regular basis. Some customers have actually never used any other guide business, but have come back to **SW** every year!

They work closely with all the local estates, particularly Rothiemurcus (about 500,000 visitors annually).....in fact, Sally had nothing but praise for the estate, commenting that it had a very open and welcoming policy towards visitors.

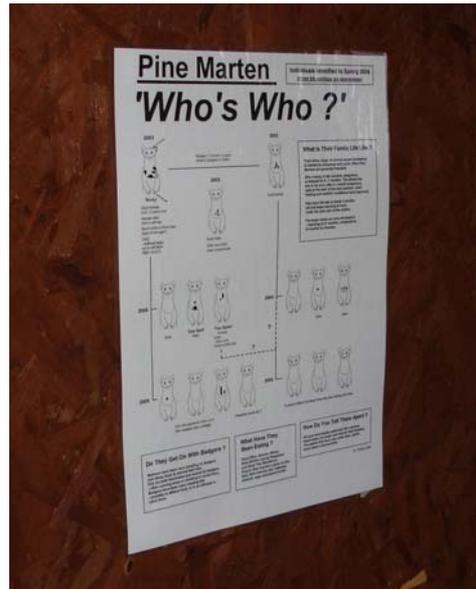
The other core value that **SW** work around is never just to point visitors towards a wooded area and tell them to go and look for the wildlife: Instead, all guide walks are tightly controlled, and everything is geared to making certain that people see what they are looking for. Quote:

Saying “Oh , you should have been here yesterday, there were pine martens everywhere” is pointless if you are today’s visitor.



Inside one of the Hides (*Lesser striped Mary Gibson in background*)

DIY Pine Marten Guide
– Each animal has its own distinctive markings, so Speyside Wildlife are building a “family tree” of the furry little critturs



SW have several purpose built hides in the area for this very purpose. Each hide is a timber cabin, located in an area known for seeing specific wildlife, and generally half buried in the ground so that you see the surroundings more from the animals view rather than sitting several feet up. Since the woodland residents don't always obligingly show themselves at 1pm in the afternoon, a visit to the hides can take 3 – 4 hours, and well into darkness. For this reason, the hides have very low level lighting built into them that won't frighten off any passing Martens or whatever.

The company sticks close to the “leave only footprints” train of thinking, and again, this is one reason why walks are always accompanied by a guide.

Environmentally, they also work closely with “Trees for Life”, and have a policy that means they actually pay that organisation a regular fee to allow them to plant trees: this is worked out to a formula based on the amount of miles covered by the transport and general travel included as part of the activity holidays.

Additionally, all waste bins at the offices have been replaced by recycling bins, all paper is used, *reused* where possible (and **both** sides are written on!), and finally recycled for cattle bedding.

Onwards (and significantly upwards) to the Cairngorm Mountain Railway.....

Most of you will be aware of the **Funicular railway**: There were a lot of comments in the media about the fact that users would not actually be allowed out of the railcar at the summit, and could only look. Many questions were also raised about the cost – it wouldn't work – waste of effort etc etc.

Well.....in a nutshell, it didn't work *immediately*. But an item such as this is in for the long haul, and not only has business being improving year upon year, but it is now acting as a positive draw for the entire Cairngorm ski-ing area, filling up the gap left by steadily dwindling numbers of “Scottish Skier Days”. As an example of how this has declined, in the late 1980's there were 700,000 of these per annum – that figure has now fallen to 180,000, which is quite a steep fall.



Oddly enough, this is the ticket office.....

Because of the decline in ski-ing, the entire Cairngorm Mountain management organisation has had to keep a careful eye on developments, and actually revises its business plan on an **annual** basis as a result! The organisation structure is that of a Social Enterprise, and although seasonal in some cases, over 100 staff are employed there. Turnover is currently £2.6 million and steadily rising, and approx: 200,000 visitors per annum are now using the facility. One way in which the railway has altered since its beginning (conceptually, at least) is that it has veered strongly towards “corporate entertainment” through the idea of being able to offer companies an evening’s entertainment and meal in the Ptarmigan Restaurant, which most of you will be aware of – the chief attraction being that it’s about 4,000 ft up! Now, when I was a spotty teenager (until a few years ago) the most you could hope for in the Ptarmigan was a bowl of watery soup and a ham sandwich.....it wasn’t the best! All this has presumably changed now, but unfortunately we never reached the Ptarmigan, since the wind speed that day was around 80+ mph, so the railway wasn’t in operation. It was stressed, however, that it is very rarely that the weather has forced a cancellation of a pre booked event, but there you go.



Just to prove there was some snow!

People we met were Dougie Somerville, the manager, and Cathy Mordaunt who is a full time resident ecologist working to ensure that the entire ski area meets the challenge of operating in not only a National Park, but in an area of key importance in terms of wildlife, environment, and nature. Together, they are working at taking the area towards environmental sustainability, while still managing to cater for the tourism and ski-ing public. This is one reason why the funicular railway still adheres to its original “you can’t get out at the summit” policy - having an “open” policy would apparently allow something like 50 -70,000 *extra* people onto the summit of Cairngorm and the surrounding hills, with huge implications for both the environment and for safety.



↑
Cathy Mordaunt, front left (Dougie Somervilles knees just visible!)

The future: A commitment to environmental and energy efficiency, a realisation that they must diversify away from ski-ing and ski related visitors, and focus on what they now regard as their main selling product – The Cairngorm Environment. To this end, plans are now underway to turn the area and the ski-ing centre into a world class facility for research into the mountain environment.

And so to lunch.....

Which took place in the Mountain Café, located on the left hand side of the main road as you drive through Aviemore. The café has a set of core values based around being environmentally sensitive, sourcing ALL ingredients locally where possible, and recycling everything from glass to tin. They also make a point of going for “fair trade” products such as coffee, tea, chocolate, sugar etc. To be honest, I have often used Aviemore as a drop in point around lunchtime for soup, but have never used the Mountain Café before! Well, that will change, because not only was the food excellent / fresh / locally sourced and so on, but we were all very impressed with the commitment shown towards the area, support for the National park, and recycling as much as possible.



The happy band of revellers, left, and some of the home made products on sale (all made using local products and suppliers.....



This commitment was displayed again at **“Ravenscraig” Guest house.**

This was a 12 room Guest House (Old Victorian – type building), run by Jonathan Gatenby. Jonathan is the chair of the Aveimore Business Association, so was well placed to speak with authority on the National park and the area generally.

Environmentally, he used a waste compactor (which *halves* the waste volume.....a not insignificant amount when you are running a guest house!). Low energy bulbs are used throughout, and Ravenscraig apparently takes a great deal of European based bookings on the strength of having a “Green Tourism” award. They are also part of an informal grouping of similar B&B / Guest Houses in Aviemore that carry details of each others daily room availability, the attitude being that’s it’s far better to keep visitors in the area, rather than meet them with a simple “Sorry, we’re full” and perhaps then have the custom race off over the hills towards Carrbridge. Finally, Jonathan showed off a neat wee gadget called a “costplug” – this plugs into any socket in the house and measures the exact amount of electricity being used by whichever item is plugged in to that socket, be it a TV, fridge, PC, cattle prod, whatever.....you can then take steps to effect savings by either switching the item off when you aren’t using it, unplugging it, or not using “standby” etc.

National Park? Jonathan can be quoted as saying “It has been a massive boost to business”, and that it has “Made Aviemore and the area into a more cohesive unit”

This feeling came across strongly throughout the day from everybody we met and spoke to .

Alvie and Dalraddy Estates:

Why, yes, I *have* left the best to last (although conveniently, it was the last visit of the day anyway). A & D Estates cover about 13,000 acres (40% of which is in the National Park), with the estate house just a mile or two down the A9 from Aviemore. The house is a beautiful sporting lodge type of building which has been in the family since 1927 (*new money, then.....*). The owner is James Williamson, who is a qualified in Land Management to trade, and he came across very well indeed – fully appreciating that a modern estate must work to earn its keep, and under no illusions about how to achieve sustainability. So, what does the estate do to earn a crust?

- Fully working sawmill
- 4 farms & 26 houses on the estate
- Holiday caravans (96) & chalets (10)
- Corporate entertainment – paintball etc
- Biking
- Horses
- Orienteering (annual competition attracts **3,000** people per day!)
- Quarrying
- Smithy
- Woodchip supply
- Land Management consultancy services
- Falconry, Archery, Water sports

And so on – the list was never ending! They even produce their own electricity! The point was made quite strongly that although people tend to think of estate owners such as James as being “wealthy”, the value of an estate such as A & D would get you about 50 acres in Lincoln or a semi detached in Fulham! The net worth is not great in terms of pounds sterling. And to maintain the house itself (18 bathrooms, 44 rooms, and a £20,000 per annum heating bill) takes quite a bit!

Nevertheless, the estate is an integral part of the entire region, and provides a great deal of employment for a wide range of people through sub letting of buildings to local businesses (many of whom employ only one or two people), supply of woodchip and quarry materials, and direct employment via the caravans and visitor orientated services.

And to close....

So there we are. An extremely interesting visit, and one which left myself at least with a firm impression that the Aviemore area is really beginning to find its feet again – and furthermore, that the National Park designation has been a prime mover in all of this. There were clear commitments to taking care of the environment, a sense of pride in the area from everybody we spoke to, and a clear appreciation that working together towards the “bigger picture” can achieve far more than individual efforts.

And I haven't even mentioned MacDonald Hotels (and neither did many others).

Some notes, and addresses:

No photos of Alvie and Dalraddy unfortunately, as it was dark by the time we arrived there: Beautiful House though, with a few well – known and recognisable paintings hanging in the entrance area and first hall.



Here's the house
in better weather
though.....

E – Mail addresses are as follows:

Speyside Wildlife:

www.speysidewildlife.co.uk (Sally Dowden)

Funicular Railway and Cairngorm Mountain area:

www.cairngormmountain.co.uk

Mountain Café, Aviemore:

www.mountaincafe-aviemore.co.uk

Ravenscraig Guest House:

www.aviemoreonline.com

Aviemore Chamber of Commerce: **(Info about the whole area)**

www.aviemore.co.uk

The actual National Park itself:

www.cairngorms.co.uk

Alvie and Dalraddy Estates:

www.alvie-estate.co.uk

D. Gibson, January 2007