

THE SPECIAL LANDSCAPE QUALITIES OF THE CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK

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1.0 General Qualities

“At last the full prospect of these glorious Cairngorms” Cockburn (1798)

- ***Magnificent mountains towering over moorland, forest and strath***

The dramatic, glacial topography of mountain, corrie and glen, the swathes of open heather moorland, the great forests of pine and birch, and the broad straths of farmland and settlement stretching back into prehistory, together create a landscape which has held firm in the public imagination since the days of Queen Victoria.

It is a landscape of great variety, with distinctive landforms, wildlife, colours and textures, and, equally important, containing less tangible qualities such as the evocation of wilderness, naturalness, remoteness, cultural continuity and recreational exploration.

Its appeal is undiminished by familiarity through books, calendars, postcards and shortbread tins because the underlying force and grand scale of nature dominates and bestows a distinct, aesthetic beauty; and because the infinite variations in colour, atmosphere and weather mean the landscape rarely looks the same, even on consecutive days.

‘The depth and remoteness of solitude, the huge mural precipices, the deep chasms between the rocks, the waterfalls of unknown height, the hoary remains of the primeval forest, the fields of eternal snow, and the deep black lakes at the foot of the precipices, are full of such associations of awe and grandeur and mystery, as no other scenery in Britain is capable of arousing.’
John Hill Burton (1864)

- ***Vastness of space, scale and height***

Humans feel small in such a vast landscape of wide panoramas. Six out of seven of Scotland’s highest peaks are found here, and the mountain core stands sentinel over the whole area. The corries and glens are large and dramatic, and the wide, high plateaux are more expansive than any others in Britain.

Open, rolling heather moorland covers great tracts of land, woodlands are extensive and the straths are on a grand scale, hosting majestic rivers.

‘A place so wild and grand.’ Queen Victoria after a visit to Glen Muick

‘The roof of Scotland.’ Macneish (2008)

‘Highest and most massive range of Arctic mountain landscape anywhere in the British Isles.’
Cairngorms Working Party (1992)

- ***Strong juxtaposition of contrasting landscapes***

A journey through the Park reveals many strong contrasts in an ever-changing array of surprise and visual delight. These include the sight of intimate, village gardens against a backdrop of snow-clad peaks; high, exposed mountains glimpsed through sheltered trees, or seen rising above fertile farmland; green pastures adjacent to heather moorland; heather intimately mixed with beautiful, ancient pines, or cladding the open hills in large swathes; rolling hills a short distance from enclosed glens; steep slopes ending suddenly at flat glen

floors; a smooth, undulating plateau abruptly falling away to dramatic cliffs; high, mountain corries a short walk from a road; a designed, ordered landscape set amongst wild hills.

'The sight of Cairngorm mountains whose hollow cliffs are filled with never melting snow. The cap of winter upon the crown, of luxuriant smiling summer below.' Sarah Murray (1796)

- ***A landscape of layers, from inhabited strath to remote, uninhabited upland***

The landscape tends to be horizontally stratified, ascending to the summits in a series of layers: from a meandering river, through a strath of settlement and farmland, through rough pasture, wood pasture, wood and forestry, to moorland with its patchwork of muirburn, and eventually to the high, corrie-fringed mountains.

Within the landscape there are also layers of time-depth, with traces of past land use stretching from present day back into prehistory.

- ***'The harmony of complicated curves'*** Quigley (1939)

This is a landscape of curves. The hills and peaks are rounded with long, undulating, smooth ridges, and the plateaux are gently convex. The moorland is rolling. Corries and glens, scooped out by past glaciers, are concave. At lower levels glacial moraines create hummocky, rounded landforms. The straths are gently profiled, and the rivers along the floors are wide, meandering and sinuous. The curves of the National Park present a contrast to the more angular landscapes found in the western Highlands.

- ***Landscapes both cultural and natural***

At the lower altitudes the land has been long-inhabited, with patterns of land use, settlement and transport derived from the primary industries of farming, forestry and field sports. In contrast, the highest ground comprises uninhabited wild land of moor and mountain, with the greatest extent of natural vegetation and landform in the British Isles.

Hence within this large area can be found both cultural landscapes, with a rich history of human occupation, and natural, wild landscapes under the dominion of nature.

2.0 The Mountains and Plateaux

- ***The unifying presence of the central mountains***

The high ground of the Cairngorms is a unifying presence for the whole area. It is both the geographical and the visual centre, being the origin of most rivers and glens and forming the backdrop to the lives of those who live and work in the straths and glens.

- ***An imposing massif of strong dramatic character***

The high, rounded peaks and plateaux, the corries, glens and foothills, and the long, gently undulating ridges have a massive, looming and domineering presence.

However, it is the mountain massif as a whole that is the key feature, with individual mountains often hard to distinguish or identify. A trained eye can pick out the more distinctive features such as the trough of the Lairig Ghru, the cliffs of Lochnagar, the Northern Corries, or Ben Avon with its tors, but these are the exception rather than the rule.

'The Cairngorms are Britain's premier mountain range. Their scale, their altitude, and their value as wilderness country – for recreation and for nature conservation – are without equal in these islands.' Curry-Lindahl et al. (1982)

'The mountain shapes are huge but blunt and undistinguished so that they are not identifiable, not so much by their summits, but by their sides especially their corries.' Crumley (1991)

- ***The unique plateaux of vast scale, distinctive landforms and exposed, boulder-strewn high ground***

The plateaux are best described by W H Murray (1961):

'The wastes of shattered stone on the summit plateaux form the biggest area of high ground in Britain. Their appeal is not an obvious one. In the act of exploring them the immense scale on which the scene is set is gradually revealed and with this the vast corries, massive slopes, long passes, wide skies, and the very barrenness of the ground, where the elements work with a power not known at lower altitudes, gives to these plateaux their distinctive quality – a majesty great enough to cast a spell on man's mind.'

They typify the wildness and uncompromising exposure sought by many people. The 'top of the world' feeling of freedom is one of the great attractions of the area, and the absence of signs of civilisation is a major draw.

However the plateaux are both fierce and fragile places. Severe gales and blizzards can be experienced at any time of the year, yet fragility is shown by their habitats being highly susceptible to human pressure and erosion.

'The plateau is the true summit of the [Cairngorm] Mountains, they must be seen as a single mountain and the individual tops Ben MacDui and Braeriach and the rest, though sundered from one another by fissures and deep descents, are no more than eddies on the plateau surface.' Crumley (1991)

'Fierce but fragile' Turnbull (2002)

- **The surrounding hills**

Within a landscape of hills and plateaux, the central massif merely represents the extreme end of a range. The 'lesser hills' within the Park have their own ridges, summits and plateaux and would be impressive in any other location.

They tend to be heather-covered, smooth and rounded, albeit with sudden unexpected crags, screes, gullies and glens. They contribute significantly to the wild, untamed appearance of the area, and many are easily accessible from the main roads.

- **The drama of deep corries**

Vast corries, with vertical headwalls and narrow gullies, provide a strong contrast to the generally undulating and rounded hills and plateaux. The hidden lochans at the bottom of many are dark and windswept places, adding to the sense of drama for those who reach them.

The northern corries of Cairn Gorm and Braeriach are particularly notable. With their cliffs visible over a wide area, and holding their snows well into the summer, they bring mountain scenery into the heart of Strathspey. Likewise, the dark headwalls of Lochnagar's corries have long caught the imagination. Other areas boast impressive corries, with, for example, Lochs Brandy and Wharral showing the corrie in its classic form.

*'England, thy beauties are tame and domestic
To one who has roamed over mountains afar
Oh! for the crags that are wild and majestic,
The steep frowning glories of dark Lochnagar.'*
From Dark Lochnagar, Lord Byron (1807)

- **Exceptional glacial landforms**

The Park contains distinctive, clearly visible and very varied landforms arising from the power of ice and water during glaciated periods. These are exceptional in western Europe and, in addition to corries, include U-shaped valleys, screes, moraines, and kettle holes.

'The Cairngorm mountains are a mass of granite thrust up through the schists and gneiss that form the lower surrounding hills, planed down by the ice cap and split, shattered and scooped by frost, glaciers, and the strength of running water.' Shepherd (1977)

'With the coming of the ice-ages, glaciers gouged U-shaped furrows of the glens, dissecting the old plateau but still leaving the remnants of it which still characterise the high ground of the range today. Enormous rivers spewing from the melting ice washed down huge quantities of ice-ground material, occasionally cut a deep rocky defile, and deposited it as hillocks and ridges of boulders, gravel, and clay at lower levels.'

'Only in a very few places in the world, such as Baffin Island in arctic Canada, can you see such a distinctive and wide range of landforms – granite plateaux studded with tors, varied corries, moraines, defiles, and lochs, concentrated in such a small area.' Curry-Lindahl et al. (1982)

- ***Snowscapes***

Snow is present for much of the year on the high tops, whether as a winter covering or as individual snow beds standing out from afar. Its presence adds to the impressiveness and grandeur of the mountains, emphasising their harsh climate and the dominance of nature.

3.0 Moorlands

- ***Extensive moorland, linking the farmland, woodland and the high tops***

Vast stretches of moorland characterise the Park, and it is probably the best place in the world to experience the distinctive browns and purples of swathes of heather. In late summer, the heather in full bloom is symbolic of the Scottish Highlands. It dominates the middle range hills, ascends the higher slopes and in places descends to the floor of the straths. The matrix of heather unifies the landscape elements of the whole Park, occurring throughout and linking the farmland, woodlands and the high tops.

The expansive, open moors engender the exhilaration of wide open spaces and distant views, tinged at the same time with a sense of exposure to the elements.

- ***A patchwork of muirburn***

Much of the heather moorland is burnt on a cyclical basis to ensure that both young heather and old heather is present on the hillsides. This muirburn that takes place on sporting estates is designed to benefit red grouse, providing young heather for food and old for shelter.

The result is a distinctive patchwork of diverse colours: the black of newly burnt ground, the grey of older fires, the green of young heather, blaeberry and grass, and the browns and purples of mature heather.

4.0 Glens and Straths

- ***Steep glens and high passes***

Long glens are frequent within the National Park, each emerging from the high mountains. They are steep-sided, with their slopes ending abruptly on a flat valley floor.

Many are linked by spectacular upland passes, the most famous being Drumochter, The Lecht, Glenshee and the Lairig Ghru. Some glens contain remnants of Caledonian pinewood, and some are remote and uninhabited. In the latter case, the remains of long-abandoned settlements, farms or shooting lodges are sometimes visible.

Other glens, such as the Angus Glens, have been long-settled along their lower reaches. Here the valley floor is farmed, containing fields and livestock, the slopes often clothed with forestry plantations.

- ***Broad, farmed straths***

The main arteries of the Park are the wide straths. Forming natural transport corridors, they have provided access through the area from historic times until the present day.

They possess large rivers which meander across the flat valley floor and the straths have been the centre of farming and settlement since prehistoric times. With their fields, crofts, farms and villages, they provide a sense of continuity and security amongst a landscape of hills and mountains. Their slopes contain pockets of native woodland, rough grazing, heather moor and plantation forest.

Each strath is distinctive in its own way: wide Strathspey with its mountain backdrop, the narrower and more sinuous Strath Avon and Strathdon amongst gentler hills; and Royal Deeside with its characteristic pine forests and estates.

The farm buildings often retain their stone-built, 19th century vernacular architecture, and are generally situated above the flood plains. Additionally, Victorian, granite shooting lodges are often associated with these glens and straths.

- ***Renowned rivers***

The Cairngorms National Park is home to some of the best known Scottish rivers, such as the Spey, Don and Dee. These emerge as small, tumbling burns in the high mountains and evolve into large, meandering rivers. They command the centre of the glens and straths, with wide channels, sinuous curves, shingle banks, riffles, pools and level flood plains.

The journey upstream from strath to river source, through highland glen and upland burn to the snows of the corrie or plateau, encapsulates the diverse landscape qualities of the Park.

- ***Beautiful lochs***

Lochs and lochans are not common in the Park, compared to their abundance further west, but where they occur they provide a sparkling contrast or a calm reflectivity.

There are high corrie lochs, the highest water bodies in Britain, and linear lochs within glacially-sculpted glens. There are lochs nestling like jewels within dense forests of pine, and there are glistening lochs surrounded by lighter woods of birch.

5.0 Trees, Woods and Forests

- ***Dark and venerable pine forest***

There are large tracts of ancient Scots pine, long renowned for their beauty, conservation value and their timber. They occur both as pure stands and in mosaic with plantation. Where the woodland is open, the individual trees with their dark foliage and orange bark, rise with a stately grace above the heather. Each has a distinctive sculptural shape, often with a dominance of horizontals. Where the woodland is closed, verticals dominate, with tall trunks and a dark green canopy above an understorey of blaeberry, heather and mosses. Under this canopy, the pervading stillness is reminiscent of a hushed cathedral with its tall pillars and vaulted roof.

'The grandeur and sublimity of venerable, extensive woods.' Sarah Murray after a visit to Rothiemurchus in 1796

- ***Light and airy birch woods***

In many areas birch woods provide a lighter and more open contrast to the darker pines. Some of these form dense stands on hill slopes and river banks, others comprise airy wood pasture, with copses and individual trees and an understorey of grass. These latter are often found on drumlins and hummocky moraines and create distinctive and attractive variations in the landscape. Bushes of juniper are a common element in many woods of both birch and pine, a mid-storey of contrasting form and colour.

Woods of birch tend to allow intermittent views to a landscape beyond, through clearings and lightly-spaced trees, or during the leafless winter months.

- ***Parkland and policy woodlands***

Policy woodlands and designed landscapes with their tall, exotic conifers, planted groups of trees, avenues, field boundary trees and shelter belts, provide an ordered contrast to the native woodlands, commercial plantations and surrounding hills and moorland. These are found particularly in the Blair Atholl and Deeside areas.

- ***Long association with forestry***

For centuries the great pine forests of Speyside and Deeside have been important for timber, often with the logs floated down the rivers to the sea. Further south, the Atholl Estate is an example of an early pioneer of both commercial forestry and the creation of designed landscapes. Hence there is a long legacy of managed forests, logging and forest industries which continues to this day. This legacy includes remnants of log dams, iron furnaces, saw mills and tramways, as well as numerous modern plantations. It also includes the continuing tradition of timber cladding, wooden porches and wooden outbuildings.

6.0 Wildlife and Nature

- ***Dominance of natural landforms***

The burns and rivers follow their natural courses, being largely unmodified by human activity. The lochs and lochans tend to be similarly unmodified, holding their natural water levels, and one of the largest natural wetlands in Britain is found at the Insh Marshes.

Additionally, the extent and scale of the hills and mountains are such that natural landforms tend to dominate the scene, with any human modification being of a small-scale and incidental to the wider, outer landscape.

- ***Extensive tracts of natural vegetation***

Away from the straths and lower hillsides, most of the Park is clothed with swathes of relatively natural vegetation, harmoniously blended and integrating disparate elements of the park into a visual whole.

Such vegetation includes native woodland of pine and birch, moorland of heath and bog, wetland of marsh and loch, and upland of moss heath and boulder field. The national and international importance of these habitats is recognised both by the numerous nature conservation designations within the national park, and by the nature reserves that are a draw to many visitors.

- ***Association with iconic animals***

Through experience, literature and marketing, the landscape is associated in many people's minds with iconic Highland wildlife such as golden eagle, osprey, red grouse, capercaillie, ptarmigan, wildcat, red squirrel, pine marten, red deer and salmon.

Large areas are specifically protected and managed for wildlife, and these places can be popular attractions for visitors. Some animals are managed for sport with, for example, the Rivers Spey and Dee renowned for their salmon. Red grouse and red deer have brought sportsmen to the area since Victorian times.

- ***Wild land***

The mountain core contains some of the wildest and remotest areas of Britain, where the vegetation is natural, artefacts are rare, nature is in charge, and the long walk-in is the only means of getting there. On the high plateaux, there are many miles of land above 3000ft (914m), exposed to the changeable and sometimes extreme Cairngorms' climate. There are few other places in Britain where one can walk for so many miles away from roads, tracks and other human structures.

- ***Wildness***

Other areas of the Park are less remote, but the preponderance of near natural vegetation, together with distinctive wildlife and the general lack of development, can still give a perception of the dominance of nature. This includes the managed grouse moors, and the ancient, managed woods and plantations.

'A sense of closeness and intensity of exposure to nature.' Drennan Watson (1990)

7.0 Visual and Sensory Qualities

• *Layers of receding ridge lines*

It is a landscape of receding and interlocking layers, comprising a series of gently undulating and ascending ridge lines visible when looking across to distant horizons. In hazy light these appear as hues of decreasing intensity, giving great depth to the landscape. Where ridges are not broken by human structures, the receding horizons reinforce the impression of natural landforms dominating. This quality is reflected in the logo of the Cairngorm National Park Authority.

• *Grand panoramas and framed views*

Vast and distant panoramic views are frequent throughout the Park, made possible by open landscapes and elevated viewpoints, and visibility and colours always highly susceptible to changing weather and season. Views range from broad pastoral straths of green, improved pasture; middle-distance open, rolling hills of brown heather moor, with woodland at lower levels; and far distant, exposed, wild mountain terrain.

The assemblage of landscape features is aesthetically pleasing, with views often framed by vegetation and landform, and the eye led to an inviting arrangement of hill slopes and glens.

• *A landscape of many colours*

All Scottish landscapes are visually reflective of seasonal and weather-related changes. Fresh, luminous spring growth and rich autumn hues are a universal and life-enriching feature of rural Scotland.

The Park however possesses characteristics which make its colours distinctive and recognisable. These derive from its combination of bedrock, natural vegetation, lochs and rivers, land management and microclimate, and include the distinctive dark green canopy and orange bark of Scots pine; the hillside patchworks of muirburn with its various subtle hues; the brilliant white snow fields and snow patches; the lochs nestled in woodland brightly reflecting the sky; the pink granite sparkling in a sharp winter sun; and the cloak of purple heather in late summer.

• *Dark skies*

At night, even the complete absence of colour, a pitch black sky bespeckled only with the light of the stars, is a distinctive feature as dark skies become increasingly rare in Britain.

• *Attractive and contrasting textures*

As with colour, the landscape displays a myriad of attractive and contrasting textures specific to the area. This occurs at both the small scale, for example the rough, platy bark of pine with a soft heap of wood ant nest beneath; and at the large scale, such as the rolling hills of soft heather. In between, there are gritty plateaux; sheer, hard crags; rock outcrops in soft moorland; smooth pastoral grasslands; rough rivers churning over rounded pebbles; and serene, shiny loch surfaces.

- ***The dominance of natural sounds***

The hushed ancient pine woods can evoke a cathedral-like silence, the murmur of the wind in the canopy contrasting with the stillness below. In the mountains the wind howling as it sweeps up the corries, the crash of a snow avalanche, or the peacefulness of a rare, perfectly still day can all be experienced. There is the rushing water of the linns, the wind rustling across the moors, and the bellowing of the stags during the rut.

The bird calls are distinctive, whether the ptarmigan of the mountains, the red grouse of the moors, the peewits, curlews and oystercatchers of the farmland, or, in the woods, the black grouse and the capercaillie with its clicking beak.

It is easy to escape man-made noise and become immersed instead in the sounds of nature.

On the plateau '*deep and primitive silence*' can be found. Crumley (1997)

'To sit in silence amongst pines is to enter one of nature's cathedrals.' CNPA (2006)

8.0 Culture and History

- ***Distinctive planned towns***

The pink and grey-tinged granite buildings and slated roofs of designed villages and small towns, dating mainly from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, are an integral part of the landscape. Nestled unobtrusively in the glens and straths, usually well-sheltered with trees, they provide a reassuring solidity. They are rural in character having no high-rise buildings or city traffic and are a reminder of historical and social context.

Although each planned settlement has its own character and layout, they all have a main central street, often with geometric streets running perpendicular. Typically there is a tree-lined square, surrounded by large, public, stone buildings.

- ***Vernacular stone buildings***

Within the park are found numerous traditional stone buildings, mostly dating from the 18th and 19th centuries and reflecting the geology of the area. These fit well into the landscape, with the granite buildings of town, village or isolated houses being particularly notable. Porches supported by hewn tree trunks are a particularly distinctive feature.

- ***Dramatic, historical routes***

The Grampians have always been a barrier to travel between the Central Lowlands and the north, with routes limited to the straths, glens and passes which cut through the mountains.

The main roads still follow old routes through the dramatic, wild scenery of the high passes of Glenshee, The Lecht and Drumochter, following the line of the 18th century military roads. These passes provide a sense of anticipation during the ascent and during the descent the splendid Cairngorms' landscape comes into view, giving a sense of arrival once traversed, and also a sense of security on reaching habitation. Other traditional routes such as the Lairig Ghru, Glen Feshie, Glen Tilt, Glen Dee, Jock's Road and the Gaick Pass are now the domain of the hillwalker.

- ***The wistfulness of abandoned settlements***

The glens and straths of the Cairngorms are littered with the ruins of past settlement. These range from the forts and round-houses of the prehistoric past to the townships and shieling-huts used for summer grazing of more recent times. These settlements have contributed to the development of the landscape that we see today, forming part of its character and often providing points of reference for the visitor.

Additionally, throughout the area there is a rich legacy of Gaelic place-names, a reminder of the Gaelic heritage that still permeates the landscape.

- ***Focal cultural landmarks of castles, distilleries and bridges,***

The straths and glens have always been important strategically and defensive fortifications from duns to castles go far back in history. Many, such as Corgarff Castle, Blair Castle and

the Ruthven Barracks, form prominent landmarks, marking periods of conflict and 'restlessness' (Woodburn, 1975).

Numerous stone bridges remain, many dating back to the 18th century military roads. Found both on and off-road, these make attractive incidental features and are an interesting reminder of past transport links and military campaigns, forming an important tangible expression of the history of the landscape.

A distinctive feature of several settlements is the traditionally-built whisky distillery with its associated bonded warehouses.

- ***The Royal connection***

The Highlands generally and the Cairngorms in particular were popularised by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert after their purchase of the Balmoral estate in 1848. Deeside often reminded Prince Albert of parts of the German hills with its broad strath, coniferous wooded hillsides and rocky outcrops. Since then, the Royal connection has been maintained, attracting visitors to the area and used in promotion by local businesses.

9.0 Recreation

- ***A landscape of opportunities***

Since Victorian times, the outstanding scenery of the area has been a draw to visitors. The diverse landscapes lend themselves to a wide range of pursuits and it is one of the foremost localities for outdoor recreation in Britain. Whilst some visitors seek out the physical challenge of an extreme environment in extreme conditions, others choose physical endeavour in a more organised and safer setting.

The high mountains are both alluring and forbidding, attracting climbers, walkers and winter sports enthusiasts. However, the rounded summits and gentle slopes can turn treacherous in sudden changes of weather, and being at the mercy of the elements can be an added attraction and source of exhilaration.

But it is not just the highest mountains that attract people to the outdoors. Active pursuits on the lower ground include water sports, cycling and horse-riding, together with the traditional sporting pursuits of deer-stalking, grouse shooting and fishing.

There are also many who are content to enjoy gentler and less challenging pursuits, whether low level walking, bird-watching, exploring the past, or simply enjoying the scenery. However, all derive pleasure directly from what the landscape has to offer.

- ***Spirituality***

For those seeking peace and escape from modern intrusions, solitude in this vast landscape can be readily found. Whether it is sought on the highest exposed peaks, the still calm of a pine forest or far into the heather-clad hills, the beauty of the landscape and dominance of nature prevails.

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