



# **North East Mountain Trust**

## **BALMORE TO AUCHTAVEN HILLTRACK REPORT**

**Statement for  
SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT Hearing  
17<sup>th</sup> November, 2007**

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## **APPENDIX**

1. Track log using the photo numbers as GPS waypoints ID.
2. A4 Photographs used within the report.
3. Additional photographs on attached CD.

## **HILLTRACK REPORT**

### **Introduction**

In spring 2005, Invercauld Estate did extensive engineering of a track from Balmore almost to Auchtavan in Glen Feardar, inside the Deeside National Scenic Area.

Recently a survey of this track was carried out by two N.E.M.T. members Messrs K. Freeman and K. Ferguson using GPS coordinate system linked to corresponding digital photographs (Incorporating a one meter rule for scale purposes).

### **Engineering works involved:**

1. Large scale track widening.
2. Extensive drainage ditch excavated.
3. Instillation of culverts.
4. Large-scale earthworks.

These works took place without the benefit of planning permission carrying out an engineering operation consisting of the extraction of minerals, construction of tracks and improvement and upgrading of an estate track leading from Balmore to Auchtavan, Invercauld Estate, Breinar, contrary to the Town and County Planning (Scotland) Act, 1997, Section 28(1).

This development is contrary to the Finalised Aberdeenshire Local Plan, August 2002, Policy Env/23 Vehicle Hill Tracks, which state: "Vehicle hill tracks and extensions to them will be refused unless they can be integrated satisfactorily into the landscape and minimise

detrimental impact such as soil erosion on the environment including habitats and watercourses.

Permission is required by reason of the Town and County Planning (Restriction of Permitted Development) (National Scenic Areas) (Scotland) Direction 1987. Requiring an application for planning permission to be made for the construction of vehicle hill tracks for either agriculture or forestry purposes... where such developments are proposed within a national scenic area.

This development is also contrary to National Planning Policy Guideline 14: Natural Heritage (NPPG 14), paragraph 26, which states that National Scenic Areas (NSAs) are nationally important for their scenic quality. Planning authorities should take particular care to ensure that new development in or adjacent to a NSA does not detract from the quality or character of the landscape. They should also ensure that the scale, siting and design of such development are appropriate and that the design and landscaping are of a high standard.

## 1. Large Scale Track Widening

- a) SNH state within their Constructed tracks in the Scottish Uplands, 'Good Practice Guide' (2006) that the aim will normally be to minimise a tracks running width since this will help reduce the impact on surrounding habitats and earth heritage, interests and make it easier to fit in to the landscape. The wider the track the more substantial will be the earthworks required to negotiate steep slopes ect
- b) The original track had a width similar to that of the unaltered section on the approach to Auchtavan. See picture 1238 below;



[Picture: 1238]

And the altered section of the track is now in some places double its original width (See picture 1224 below).



[Picture: 1224]

Had these works been carried out in a proper manner originally it would have been very easy to complete the work in a way which would have been more aesthetically pleasing visually and sympathetic to the landscape. However even at this stage it will in our view be possible to reinstate the ground to minimise the worst of the visual impact.

### **Suggestions for Reinstatement of path width**

Reduced track width to a maximum of 3 meters wide and return it nearer to its original character. This can be achieved by filling in



most of the drainage ditch on the uphill side of the track. At the moment this ditch is not providing drainage. Much of the ditch has already become blocked; with silt, rock and vegetation in many places. (See picture 1196)



[Picture: 1196]

Reduce the gradient of the steep uphill face of the drainage ditch to no more than 30 degrees to blend in with the gradients of the existing hillside.

Bare rocks which currently are evident along the length of the track above the S bends some of this rock could potentially be

used to help fill in the drainage ditch and would act as a field drain. However they would then need to be covered over with top soil and turfs so they would be invisible (See picture 1220)



[Picture: 1220]

Any excess rocks which cannot be used in this way would require to be disposed of.

**Improving visual impact by re-turfing and re-seeding where appropriate.**

- Spot Turfing: Which involves creating a patchwork of cover using spade-sized heather turves, where. Large blocks of turf can be broken down to this size and planting by hand.



- Replaced turf should be laid flush with the ground surface to prevent turves drying out and provide the best opportunity of establishing as quickly and successfully as possible.
- Close Turfing: Where the whole damaged area is returfed, this is a recommended solution to damaged ground. The approach to employing this method needs to be thoroughly planned and fully specified well in advance, so that the contractors and workforce have a full understanding of the task and site. If the vegetation were to be re-established by this method it would entail obtaining a considerable number of extra turves.
- Other possibilities include; Artificial seeding with heather and/or grasses.
- Collecting heather seed is best undertaken from low altitude sites in early autumn when most seed is still in the plants. In the interests of nature conservation and the retention of local genetic stock, it is advisable to use only local seed.

## **2. Extensive drainage ditch excavated.**

On most sections of the North-East or uphill side of the track, and where the track levels off at a more gentle gradient the soils are freely drained, and does not require to be drained with the exception of areas where there is evidence of wet soils due to flushing and where nature's natural watercourse can be fed into a drain that crosses the track.

However a large drainage ditch has been dug unnecessarily deep along the whole length of the track on the upslope and on the flat section towards Auchtavan and has created in a number of places a near vertical exposed face of subsoil resulting in a significant visual impact on the landscape

The material gained in the creation of this drainage ditch was deposited along the track's downhill edge increasing the track width as illustrated in photograph 122. Clearly the volume of excess material and its disposal had a cost implication for the track. That is why the excess material was deposited on the downhill side of the track, instead of the preferred and more expensive option to have it removed elsewhere or off site.

Photo 1219 below highlights near vertical drainage ditch.



[Picture: 1219]

### **Suggestions for the removal of drainage ditch**

With the use of an excavator either carefully remove turfs and topsoil and where possible blend the slopes back into the natural profile of the hill, to a gradient of no more than thirty degrees or with addition of extra materials fill in and carefully cover the bare areas by returning existing topsoil and turfs to the re-graded slope along with the addition of some new vegetation i.e. turfing of heathers or artificial seeding with heather and /or grasses It may also be appropriate to include some new woodland planting in areas alongside the track that have been affected either directly or indirectly by the engineering works

By grading out these ditches it should be possible to blend them into the surrounding slopes, achieving more successful revegetation and reducing the risk of erosion. This will significantly improve the appearance of the track.



### **3. Instillation of Culverts**

The majority of culverts currently in place are partially blocked with little evidence of them providing anything in the way of drainage despite this the downhill slopes do not appear to be adversely affected by this state of affairs. This provides further evidence that the vast majority of these culverts are simply not required. (See pictures 1204 – Showing the entrance to a blocked culvert within the drainage ditch, 1195).



[Picture: 1204]





[Picture: 1195]

With the removal of the large drainage ditches, the use of culverts should only be required at locations where streams or natural drainage channels across the track. Optimum drainage could be achieved with a combination of culverts and cross drains .surplus culvert pipes should then be removed. The remaining culverts should be carefully designed with use of field drains and silt traps at the top most side of the culvert pipe, this would allow the water to slow down and deposit suspended material within the trap The exit should be carefully chosen to end in a downhill sloping natural gully and should also have a stone splash apron to dissipate the energy of the water and thus avoid erosion.

#### **4. Large Scale Earthworks**

There is evidence of a large amount of bare rock left over from excavations strewn around the site which is unsightly and detracts from the natural beauty of the area. (See pictures 1216, 1236,)



[Picture: 1216]





[Picture: 1236]

This situation would be improved by gathering up all excess rock and fill in sump area created in borrow pit in picture 1236. Cover with soil then thin layer of peat or alternatively returf with heather and grasses.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has drawn attention to the numerous problems associated with the Balmore to Auchtaven track on the Invercauld estate which was excavated without planning permission. This has led to a negative visual impact and has caused damage to the natural environment. Furthermore this paper has suggested a number of possible solutions which would help to lessen the damage to the environment and reduce the visual impact of an area which is after all within the National Park and partly lies in a National Scenic Area.