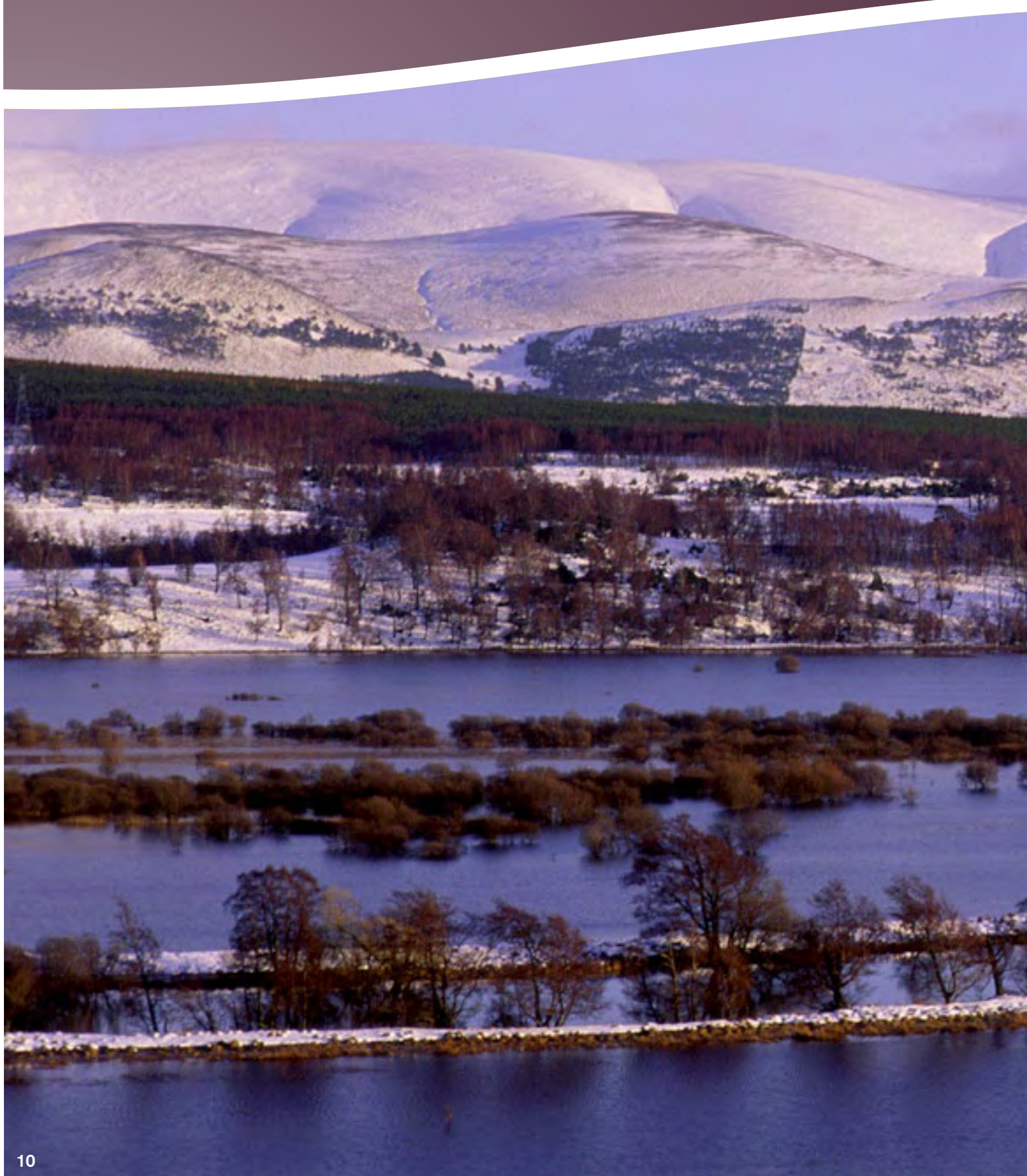


2. At the heart of the Park



'...a mountain horizon without, it seemed, any northern limit, a winter school of white whales...'

Jim Crumley, *A High and Lonely Place*





At the heart of the Park

Key theme 1

The huge granite mountains of the Cairngorms National Park are unique. Their influence has shaped the natural heritage, people, landscapes and culture around them.

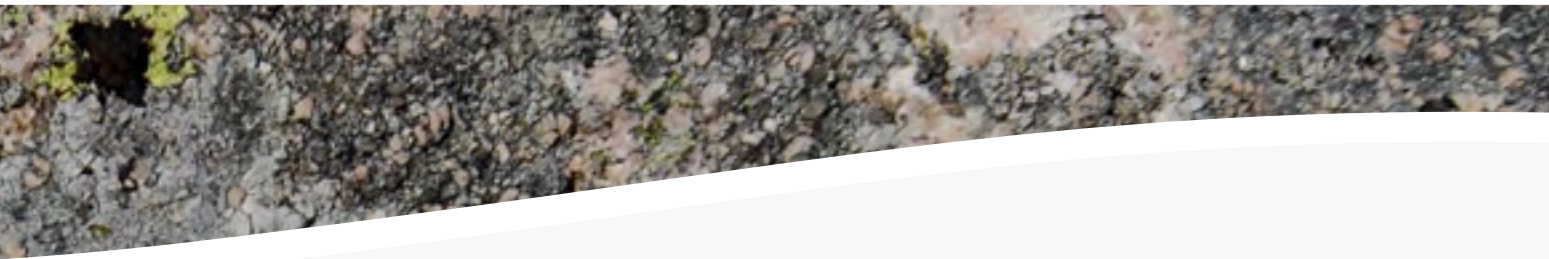
Scotland has other great forests, open moorland and famous rivers, but nowhere else is there anything like the huge expanse of high ground that forms the core of the Park. The rock types, size, shape and climate of these mountains make them the unique feature of the Cairngorms National Park.

The vast plateau is split into two sections: the main massif centred around Loch A'an, and the outlying flank centred on Lochnagar and Glas Mhol. Together they form the largest area of ground over 900 metres (about 3,000 feet) in Britain, a broad dome with a fringe of moorland, straths and glens spreading out from the central core. You can think of the shape of the National Park as being rather like a fried egg with a deceptively high yolk: an image to contemplate over breakfast perhaps!

Remote, or the source of it all?

In Strathdon, or in the depths of the forest around Carr-Bridge, the mountains might seem far away. But the straths where the forests grow and the rivers that water the farmland are there because of the glaciers that once flowed from the mountains. The mountains do more than define the skyline: they have shaped everything around them.

The mountains also mould what people do in the Park, and the way its history has unfolded. They are a barrier, separating places only a few miles apart, but the shared concerns of a lifestyle governed by the mountains mean that Glen Clova has more in common with Tomintoul than either have with the soft plains beyond the hills. Prehistoric settlers moved from hillside to valley with the rhythm of the seasons; the pattern of later settlements reflects the opportunities and challenges of the landscape. The crops people can grow and the way they tend their animals are all shaped by the hills, by their geology, their shape, and by the weather they create.



The size of a small country

The sheer size of the Park shows just how wide the influence of the mountains is. The largest National Park in the UK, it covers an area nearly half as big again as the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.



The geologist's tale

It's hard to escape the influence of granite in the Park. The rock is a strong link between different areas, and one that's easy to find evidence for anywhere in the Park. 'Granite really defines the landscape's character', says Rachel Wignall, a geologist working with Scottish Natural Heritage. 'If you look up you'll see granite hills; you're often walking on the stuff, and you can pick up granite stones washed down from the central mountains from any of the rivers. In many places you're surrounded by granite buildings, and the drystane dykes in the fields are a good connection to the hills too.'



The Cairngorms National Park actually offers some of the best examples in the world of how mountains are sculpted by ice. The high tors, worn granite boulder fields and glacier-carved cliffs are part of a rich collection of features left behind by millions of years of climate change. They could well hold clues to the way our present day environment will evolve. It's an exceptional combination of features – comparable with far more remote places like Baffin Island in Canada – and is another reason the Park is internationally important.

At the heart of the Park

Case Study – CairnGorm Mountain

A train ride to the core

For CairnGorm Mountain, giving visitors a sense of the National Park's mountain heartland is central to their work. 400,000 visitors a year visit the site, and the aim is for them all to get a feeling for the plateau, even if they cannot physically get there.

'We want to make the special qualities of the mountains accessible to everybody', says Jim Cornfoot, Interpretive Coordinator, 'and for their visit here to be more than just a train journey. I think a feeling for what the mountain core means is central to an experience of the Park.'

The company is developing a 'mountain garden' next to the Coire Cas car park as a place that will duplicate as far as possible the plants and environments of the high tops. The cultural aspect of the mountains is important too. The Cairngorm Art Project has produced large panels that decorate the base station with evocations of the summit's rocks and cold, together with the names of famous climbing routes. The Project is also building a rampart viewpoint where people can sit and listen to short stories about the mountains.



Case Study – Steve Willis

A constant backdrop

Steve leads hill walking and wildlife watching groups for several companies in the National Park. For him, the vastness of the landscape sets it apart. 'You just don't get the same sense of scale anywhere else in Scotland', he says.

The people he leads are looking for local knowledge, and for someone who can interpret the landscape, as much as for someone who will lead them through what can be an alien environment. Steve uses the size of the hills as a talking point on his tours: 'We'll look at a map and I'll show them how we've only crossed one shoulder of a mountain on what's been a reasonably long walk. People can be quite awe-struck by that!'

Wildlife trips may not involve the mountains directly, but they're always there as a backdrop. 'Even from Abernethy Forest people are asking about the hills they can see. I'll tell folk the story of their names, and point out just how far away they are – they're often amazed to realise how big they must be.' The mountains' human stories are important for Steve too. 'It's easy to look at the hills and think they're just empty wilderness, but they have rich stories to tell of the people who live and work amongst them – today as well as in the past.'





Personal View

Cameron McNeish, writer & broadcaster

Having lived in the shadow of the Cairngorms for over thirty years, and climbed them for even longer, I'm aware that these are hills that keep their best secrets for those who make the effort to climb them. Up on the summits, on the roof of Scotland, I've always been thrilled by looking down on the sensational rather than gazing up from below. I love the sense of the boulder strewn slopes falling away from my feet, still lochans appearing on shining levels and broad chasms splitting the mountainsides to reveal dizzying depths.

It's the climate that makes the Cairngorms so special to me – the sights and sounds are of the Arctic, and in winter the wind screams and blasts like the Arctic.

There's nothing else like the Cairngorms in Scotland. It's not the height of the Cairngorm summits that leaves such a lasting impression on me: it's the spaciousness and the vast, open skies. It took me many years to simply grasp the sheer scale of the place.

Starting Points



Here are some ideas about how you can start linking your interpretation to this theme:

- Get hold of a copy of *Cairngorms – A Landscape Fashioned by Geology* (Scottish Natural Heritage 2006). It's a short, easy to read introduction to the story of the Park's rocks and landforms.
- Find out what's in your area that could help people appreciate how the mountains and glaciers shaped the land, and the influence the mountains have on life around them.
- Spectacular landscape features, such as the Burn o' Vat near Dinnet on Deeside, are a great opportunity to impress people with the Park's geology and the way ice and water have worked on it. Think about how your interpretation could make a link, however fleeting, with the mountains. It will give visitors a grander sense of scale, and help them link individual sites to the Park's unique character.
- Anyone who takes people outdoors for a living, such as mountain bike guides, Rangers on an evening walk, or keepers stalking deer, will be working in the shadow of the mountains. How could you get people to notice the hills now and then, and to think about the influence they've had on everything around them?
- The textures and shapes of the hills are powerful icons of the Park. Guest houses and restaurants could use river-worn rocks as ornaments, or use images of the high tops to decorate their rooms.