

## **UPAG Meeting, held at Kinlochewe Field Station and Ben Damph Estate 21 September 2015**

### **Overview of existing funding**

Fiona Cuninghame (SNH) welcomed everybody to the meeting and explained that SNH were planning an “upland path summit” in November this year, to which representatives from funding, path management and recreation organisations would be invited. One of the main purposes of this meeting will be to discuss funding requirements for the future.

Established funding sources were not discussed in detail, but it was noted that HLF, who have been a major source of upland path funding in recent years, should not be relied upon given the competitiveness of funding. A growing trend appears to be sourcing funding from a diverse range of funders, as opposed to a small number of large funders.

Fiona pointed out that SNH’s annual grants budget had reduced from around £15m to circa £3m, with the budget to manage their own NNRs reduced by about 40%. Given this funding trend, SNH can only be a part of the overall picture, possibly with a role to play in lobbying for what the industry sees as priorities for funding, for example maintenance.

### **Creative possibilities for funding**

It was agreed that accessing funding for upland pathwork is challenging, particularly for maintenance and that project managers need to be creative when considering a project without losing sight of the original aims of the work. Whilst some people considered some of the discussion peripheral to upland pathwork, others felt it was important to discuss because path managers get involved in a range of projects and there could be the potential to influence other work such as track design.

- **Hydro schemes** Mary Gibson (SNH) explained that there are numerous hydro schemes in Wester Ross, all of which require vehicular access to the power house and in most cases at least ATV access to the intakes. In her experience, it had been possible to encourage developers to apply footpath techniques when installing or upgrading existing stalkers paths that extend from the power house to the intakes, for example Coulags and Glasnock. It would be possible to apply this concept to other hydro schemes, where there are no existing paths and a ‘track’ is specified. It was however hard to persuade developers to carry out works out-with the footprint of the scheme so the gain can be limited depending on the layout of the scheme.

Hydro schemes did not appear to generate the same scale of community benefit funding that had been seen from windfarms. However, a cautionary note was sounded regarding community benefit funding, in that it could be seen as something of a bribe.

Matt Dent (Highland Council) pointed out that councils’ development planners do not take community benefit into account, as it is not a material planning consideration.

There was some discussion about inappropriate use of vehicles on tracks that were not fully constructed. There was general agreement on the need to ensure that existing track building is appropriate and of the highest quality, AND to try and find ways of pulling in funding from hydro developments into paths in the surrounding area.

Chris Goodman (JMT) suggested the idea of installing a small micro-hydro scheme as part of path development (i.e. with the pipe actually buried in the path tray) to generate ongoing funding.

- **Core paths:** Core paths are being reviewed in the Highlands and there was discussion about the possibility of the Coulags – Annat path being put forward as Access Officers have been tasked with providing additional longer routes. There was a suggestion that core path status had been seen by some as a “tag” for funding. However, it was felt that the link between core path status and funding was questionable at best. Fiona made the point that core paths were more likely to get SRDP funding through the Improving public access scheme and that whilst this was focused towards lowland paths, core paths with some upland style features may still receive funding, for example those that are more accessible, with good links to other paths.
- **Tourist tax:** It was pointed out that many countries impose a “tourist tax” on visitors. The idea was generally favourably received by those at the meeting, but there were questions over the logistics of administering it. There was a suggestion that well-maintained paths bring more benefits than just tourism, and that this should be highlighted.

The idea of a feasibility study, to look at how paths are funded in other countries was put forward and it was suggested that SNH could lead on this and that HIE or UHI may be interested. It was noted that Loch Lomonds and the Trossachs National Park Authority are putting together a study to look at the economic benefit of the West Highland Way.

- **Carpark charges:** These can make an important contribution, but are not the only solution. If a charge is levied for car parking, it is essential to ensure that paths in the immediate vicinity of the car park are very well maintained, so that the benefits derived from the charge are obvious to users.
- **BIDS - Business Improvement Districts:** <http://www.bids-scotland.com/> Graeme Maclean (Developing Mountain biking in Scotland – DMBinS) suggested that it could be worth approaching more BIDS for maintenance funding as they could agree to put a proportion of their funding into local paths.

## Priorities

There was a brief discussion on whether the focus for additional funding should be on new or existing paths, in remote or populated areas.

Securing funding for maintenance of existing paths was agreed as one of the biggest challenges to upland path management and a key priority. It was unanimously agreed that it was essential to keep paths maintained in order to secure the existing investment and to minimise the impact on the mountain landscape and biodiversity.

The second key priority identified was to develop a mechanism to tackle urgent repair work required in areas where there is currently not a partnership or Trust to take forward a co-ordinated approach.

Educating the public on the costs and reasons for maintaining facilities was also raised as a priority, which could encourage the public to engage more with maintenance either through volunteering or donations. The COAT car park at Loch Muick was suggested as a good example of this.

### **Creation of a National Access Trust**

Chris Goodman introduced the idea of creating a National Access Trust/Fund, which could be geared towards maintenance and repairs of paths which have been historically more difficult to fund.

He suggested the following as a possible model:

- Primarily a fund-raising, co-ordinating and facilitating body (rather than hands on delivery);
- Small number of core staff to undertake this work;
- It would ascertain the extent of built upland paths and the cost of maintaining these across Scotland and look into new ways of funding this work;
- Based on the benefits to people, economy and the environment and the need to maintain upland paths, there would be a definite ask to government, landowners, event organisers, guiding companies, outdoor kit suppliers, tourism industry etc. to contribute financially (or otherwise) to upland path maintenance;
- Co-ordinated approach on developing parking facilities, interpretation and charges;
- Membership could include NGOs (such as John Muir Trust, the National Trust for Scotland, Scottish Wildlife Trust etc.) and land managers, possibly with a cost associated with membership
- NGO's could contribute path management skills to other areas and in return could receive funding for maintenance on their properties. Land managers may be able to offer accommodation as a contribution to work on their paths;
- Based on an estimated cost for path maintenance on each estate, a fixed percentage of this could be funded by the national body, the match funding made up by the land manager (through member appeals/donations, staff time, volunteer time etc.);
- Training and advice provided by the national body to land managers with no/little experience of path management;
- Volunteer work parties set up and co-ordinated by the national body as well as ideas such as adopt a path, engaging with mountain bikers etc. and using different solutions in different areas depending on opportunities.

It was pointed out that one potential difficulty would be the decision of how the money was distributed. This might be addressed by appointing a board, and/or bringing in people with sufficient experience to contribute time (not necessarily for free).

A question was raised about whether private landowners would be prepared to pay for membership.

A partnership, with a lead partner through which funding applications are made, was suggested as an alternative model.

The start-up phase was identified as a major challenge for a single staff member, as was the requirement for a broad range of skills, including political, financial, fundraising and pathwork.

COAT was suggested as a potential model for deciding on, and administering priorities across a region. The Arran Access Trust was also suggested as an organisation which appears to work well, bringing together local organisations to raise funds for local projects. It was suggested that the Arran Access Trust may owe its success partly to the fact that it covers a very distinct area and set of communities, i.e. the island of Arran, but that a similar model may be successful in some other parts of Scotland.

There was cautious support for setting up a National Access Trust or organisation; it was agreed that having one organisation for national issues made sense, but that more work is required on the mechanics of doing this. There was more support for a national, rather than regional setup, due to the difficulties with funding and economies of scale etc. However, it was recognised that the benefit of a local setup is that it is easier to get partners together, so a national set up with a strong regional focus was preferred. It was considered that any national organisation or Trust would need to have a long term strategy and be multi-funded, not totally reliant on public sector funding, tapping into parking funding, working with volunteers and making use of existing schemes etc.

It was noted that the proposed national access organisation sounded a little like UPAG, but that UPAG did not currently have the resources to lead on this work. Unless additional resources could be found it was suggested that UPAG might be better continuing as an information sharing organisation, not least because there was insufficient capacity among UPAG members to do more.

Richard Fox gave brief details of the popular Fix the Fells project in the Lake District. <http://www.fixthefells.co.uk/>. About 80 volunteers cover a network of 185 paths and give 1500 volunteer days a year, enabling about 350 drain runs per year. Once trained volunteers have access to online information including a map and list of paths with a description of maintenance and somebody marks paths needing drain runs every month. There are scheduled drain runs every Friday and Saturday throughout the year and people can also work independently. It's entirely web based and works well, but does require a considerable amount of staff time to manage. There are also work parties, so volunteers can go out and carry out other maintenance. Whilst the project is on a bigger scale than projects in Scotland, it was recognised that a similar model could be successful in parts of Scotland, for example near the larger population centres.

#### **After lunch discussion and site visit**

The group were joined by Alex Glasgow, mountain bike tour manager and local trail user, and Charlie Hill from Ben Damph Estate.

Phil Waite (Highland Council) explained that during an extremely heavy rainfall event over the past winter, a section of path on Ben Damph Estate had become severely eroded. This section forms part of the Annat-Coulags trail, an internationally acclaimed route for mountain bikers.

A local trail maintenance day was organised by Phil, Bob Brown (NTS) and Alex. In all, 12 volunteers (mostly/exclusively mountain bike trail users) carried out maintenance on the most eroded sections, clearing waterbars and cross drains. They suggested that they were keen to organise a similar event next year.

Charlie, representing the views of Duncan Gray, the owner of Ben Damph Estate, put forward the view that a right of public access should be accompanied by a public

responsibility for maintenance and improvements. The estate is cautious about the use of paths by mountain bikers, and felt that a public body should be managing access. Estate use of the track is very limited.

Graeme McLean (Developing Mountain biking in Scotland - DMBinS) suggested that the biking community in general could come together to contribute towards helping with maintenance etc., but would prefer to see it being co-ordinated by a national body.

It was suggested that raising awareness of responsible use among mountain bikers would be worthwhile (e.g. avoiding skidding and drifting), although it was pointed out that only a small minority of bikers are irresponsible. Graeme explained that there were already a number of things, e.g. cycling proficiency schemes.

Graeme was keen to input into designing paths with bikes in mind, as it is usually possible to incorporate bike-friendly features into trail design without significant additional effort. Educating professionals, and film makers about responsible trail use, was also seen as a worthwhile way of encouraging/educating bikers as to how to ride more responsibly.

The group visited the section of the Annat-Coulags route where maintenance had been carried out in April this year.

**Right:** We saw examples of modifications to waterbars that make them more MTB friendly- rocks put in to act a ramps, etc., important to be aware of MTB use when designing/building water bars/cross drains. It's not necessarily more difficult to do this, and with slight changes to design, e.g. creating a bit of a ramp on the upslope side, or building a pitched "wath"- stone lined, round bottomed trench rather than a square sided cross drain, this could be done.



Visitor numbers were estimated to be very approximately 500-1000 per year, with almost no use by bikers in winter. Alex highlighted the change in proportion of use over the last 8 or so years, from walkers being the vast majority to now bikers being roughly even with walkers.

"Capitalised maintenance"- was suggested as a possibly useful phrase when applying for funding.

The need to get across the importance of continued maintenance to funders was raised. It was suggested that a concerted effort should be made (possibly by groups such as UPAG) to do this. Arranging site visits for funders to show them real paths and real issues of maintenance was thought to be something worth attempting.





**Above left:** Example of water bar that has filled up with gravel since maintenance in April, highlighting the need for regular maintenance.

**Above right:** Illustrating a mountain biker's "desire line", where bikers have spontaneously started using a short diversion over a slabs of bedrock, thereby reducing wear on the constructed path.

**Right:** Illustrating the different wear patterns of walkers (left) and bikers (right).

