

UPAG Site Visit – 19th September 2016

Hosted by: The Nevis Partnership

Venue: Ben Nevis (Bottom half of the path)



Attendees

Lizzie Cooper- The Nevis Partnership
Douglas Sinclair – The Nevis Partnership (part)
Fiona Cuninghame – Scottish Natural Heritage
Caroline Fyfe – Scottish Natural Heritage
Chris Goodman – John Muir Trust
Alison Austin – John Muir Trust
Chris York – Walking-the-Talk
Nic Bullivant – Cairngorm Mountain Ranger Service
Helen Lawless – Mountaineering Ireland

Gordon White – COAT
Richard Fox - LDNPA
Charles Gameson – UPT
Julian Digby – Caringorm wilderness Contracts Ltd
Stuart Taggart - Caringorm wilderness Contracts Ltd
Gordon MacDonald – McGowans Ltd
Bob Aitken - Consultant
Julie McMorran - Forestry Commission Scotland

Introduction

Lizzie Cooper provided a brief introduction to Ben Nevis and the Nevis Landscape Partnership scheme at their office. Ben Nevis is Britain's highest mountain standing at a height of 1345m. The summit area of the mountain lies within the Ben Nevis Special Area of Conservation and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI); the Nevis Management

Area also belongs to the Ben Nevis and Glencoe National Scenic Area. The path is just over 7.5km long and every year over 110,000 visitors come to Fort William to climb Ben Nevis, most via the Mountain Path from the Visitor Centre. Many of those climbing Ben Nevis are part of organised charity challenge events and in addition we have the annual Half Ben Nevis Race and the full Ben Nevis Race. The top half of Ben Nevis is owned by John Muir Trust, a partner of Nevis Landscape Partnership, and the lower half is owned by Alcan Highland Estates who support our conservation work.

The Nevis Partnership is the host organisation for the Nevis Landscape Partnership scheme, a 5year £3.8m programme of 19 projects. Our projects LP.A1 Ben Nevis Mountain Path & LP.A6 Summit Conservation both take place on various parts of the mountain. Summit Conservation is now complete, this project took place during 2014-2015 with funding made available by Heritage Lottery Fund, John Muir Trust and Ordnance Survey. The Ben Nevis Mountain Path project began last year and will continue until programme year five. Work to the lower Ben Path will be carried out by contractors and volunteers from Friends of Nevis and the National Trust For Scotland Thistle Camps. The project is funded by Heritage Lottery Fund, Scottish Natural Heritage, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and sportscotland.

There was useful discussion on issues around funding, including the lack of funding available for path maintenance in favour of capital works which can lead to construction projects being over engineered to mitigate this. There was concern over the dwindling streams of funding for capital projects. There was also some discussion on the amount of time required by staff to research and submit multiple funding applications and subsequently manage funding claims and reporting procedures. Partnership / multiple funding for projects can present a heavy administrative burden on organisations since each funder will have their own claims procedure and different evidence and reporting requirements, often requiring the same base information to be reworked into different formats.

Site Visit – Ben Nevis Mountain Path

Starting at Achintee, the first section also gives access to the Visitor Centre and Car Park, then after a straightforward climb, a path joins from the SYHA which is reached by a bridge. Beyond this, the main path takes several brief zig-zags but maintains a generally rising traverse, crosses a culvert and a bridge and rounds a corner at about 400 metres asl to continue the rising traverse up the side of the Allt Ruadh. We climbed to 450m asl before returning.

NLP are currently working in partnership with the National Trust for Scotland and are piloting Thistle Camps working on non-NTS properties. At the date of the UPAG visit two camps had visited previously and the third one was currently working on the lower slopes. We stopped to look at the work of the first camp which had taken place during a very hot week in May 2016. It involved a 100m section with predominantly aggregate path and a small amount of pitching toward to top end. The camp had also created a turf-lined ditch to the top side of the path.



There was lively discussion about this section of path. Although the work carried out by the Thistle Camp was agreed to be to a high standard, on account of their excellent supervision, Bob Aitken stated that the works had a deleterious effect. He considered the path to be too narrow and that without containment walkers would avoid the pitching to the top end of the section and walk on the vegetation to the side. The evidence on the day did appear to support this however, this was not actually the case. The landscaping to this section had been done in July as it was too hot and dry in May and was flourishing, however the Ben Race had taken place two week prior to the UPAG visit and it was the volume

of spectators which had caused the damage to the vegetation. This is something which perhaps needs some thought on how to prevent this kind of damage happening again as once damaged it could encourage walkers off the path.

There was a much discussion on whether the Ben nevis Path should be wider, up to 2m to cope with the volume of traffic. The following observations were made:

- It was noted that it was wider than most lesser used mountain paths

- It would not be possible to widen the path all the way up, but that natural containment would keep walkers on the path.
- The path up Snowdon was a 2m machine built path and although not popular at the time of installation it did cope well with the volume of visitors.
- Lizzie Cooper noted that doubling the path width would in effect double the amount of funding required, which was already a problem to achieve at current levels.
- It would not be popular with the local community to widen the path.

The group moved onto the two sections carried out by the contractors during the winter season 2015/16. The following points were made about this work:

- The work was carried out by Cairngorms wilderness Contracts Ltd and McGowans Ltd
- The work was carried out between October - March to avoid the high visitor numbers over the summer.
- Over 400 tonnes of stone were required for both contracts. It was planned that the stone would come from the Ben and SNH had given permission to collect from the bolder fields above the 800m line. Due to snow cover and poor flying weather around half came from the hill the rest came from the quarry. The local quarry could not be used as the geology was different from the Ben and had to come from Bonawe Quarry (about 40 miles) for around £18 per tonne, delivered to a field in the glen opposite and airlifted.
- The volume of bags of stone obstructed use of the path and diversions were in place, although this didn't stop some people trying to get past anyway. It also made it difficult for the contractors who had to work around the bags of stone. Richard Fox noted didn't use white helicopter bags as they are quite visually intrusive.
- The work on these contracts was predominantly heavy pitching with short aggregate sections. There were problems accommodating the path on bedrock, as it tended to creep and fall down the hillside. The contractor said he would have made the landscaping harder because if there was anywhere people could tread, they did, including on all the turf landscaping and in the ditches
- There were serious health and safety considerations as the path zigzags and there was the danger of rockfall landing on the path below. As such diversions were put in place although not all walkers followed the signs or instructions.
- Some sections of pony pitching were not replaced as they were in good condition and stable. Available funding was tackling the worst sections where the path had completely collapsed.
- Several short-cuts across the zig-zags were noted. It is likely that the introduction of native tree planting in fenced enclosures will prevent this.



The groups looked at two path elements installed by the landowner. The culvert had a wet stone face and was out of keeping with everything else. As there had been no pathwork carried out on the path at the time of installation of the culvert there had been no protection on the upper side and the path surface had washed out almost immediately. The bridge, also installed by the landowner, was felt to be very robust however it was noted that the footing for the upper end of the bridge was

being undercut by the action of the burn. Both require remedial works.



Immediately beyond this, the path degenerated into an appalling scene where only the heavy built pitched path surface and the heavily-built side drains and cross drains had survived. Any path that had been completed as aggregate had washed away, leaving the stonework proud by 30 to 60 cm. In two places, turf had been eroded to depths estimated to be around one metre. A substantial section has been let as a contract which will begin in October.

As usual, meetings like this are valuable beyond the intended topic. It was interesting to hear from SNH that some SAC designations are wider than the supporting SSSI. It was good to hear how when and where the Lake District continues to use sheep's fleece instead of geotextile to reconstruct paths.

Report: Lizzie Cooper, Nevis Partnership, October 2016

With thanks to Nic Bullivant for additional notes and photos and Helen Lawless and Chris York for photos.