



THE MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL OF SCOTLAND

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Dear Nevis Partnership Board

Nevis Partnership Consultation, November 2008

Proposal to alter and extend Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe Path

Mountaineering Council of Scotland Response

The Mountaineering Council of Scotland (MCoFS) is recognised by the Scottish Government as the representative body for hill walkers, climbers and ski-tourers. We have 10,000 members, and aim to represent the interests of all 400,000 mountaineers on issues relevant to access to, and conservation of, Scotland's mountaineering environment.

The MCoFS has consulted internally and with members. This response has been drafted based on these comments and existing relevant position statements agreed by membership at a previous AGM, which is currently being updated (but likely to remain similar in respect of the points on which the following comments are based).

Background

Prior to the path construction from the junction with the CIC hut path to the outflow of Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe (referred to the 'outflow path' from now on for brevity), the essential MCoFS observations of the situation was as follows:

- There were some contained areas of erosion that were insignificant in terms of area to the north of the outflow of Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe, but are reported by SNH staff to fall on areas of Natura priority habitat
- Most of evidence that was visible was near the marker poles which had concentrated trampling
- No evidence of the dynamic nature of the erosion was available i.e. There was no data to show whether the erosion was spreading, or whether there was a pattern of changing behaviour and access to this part of the mountain

The views of MCoFS, based on the ecological, mountaineering community, footpath expertise and casual observation on a number of occasions suggest that construction of the outflow path changed people's behaviour and has increased the existing problem:

- Walkers following the outflow path in error thinking it will take them up Ben Nevis
- Walkers/climbers are following the outflow path to its end near the outflow before descending northwards in a more concentrated way than previously occurred
- The outflow path is a significant visual intrusion in an area not previously affected by human-made construction

Nevis Partnership Proposal for Path Alterations, Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe to North Face Car park

There is much in the Partnership proposals that MCofS supports, particularly reduction in width and amelioration of the regimented nature to make it less attractive for casual use and less intrusive, and removal of fencing and marker posts should be removed.

In terms of the proposed extension of the path across the outflow, MCofS has concerns. The current MCofS position agreed by membership at a previous AGM made a commitment to not support path creation where it is not repair of eroded ground. There are, however, a few examples where this position was applied pragmatically such as the Meall a Bhuachaille. Here a path was constructed in an adjacent area within a few tens of metres from the eroded line, but only about 300 metres in length. It was constructed in order to promote recovery of the broad erosion scar and to take the path through more robust ground at a more amenable gradient that would mean the ground would be more stable. Whether the outflow path creation and extension can be treated similarly flexibly is debatable. At Meall a Bhuachaille the replaced line was seriously eroded along the whole length and a significant width, the diversion avoided a craggy area which the erosion took people through, it involved no water crossings, the erosion was a defined line that had much higher use than the outflow area, the route was an established and promoted route actively used by many walkers, including hill races. Whether an exception to the MCofSs general position can be made in the case of the Ben path proposals is doubtful based on the current lack of monitoring data of eroded areas and the pattern of access use to the area.

Based on the agreed position of the MCofS, we believe that by far the best outcome would be removal of the outflow path between the junction with the path to the CIC Hut and the outflow of Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe. This would avoid the problems it is causing, and permit a joined up, fully planned long-term solution to be found. We recognise that NP is in a difficult position with respect to grant monies. However, this option must be seriously considered, possibly preceded by blocking of the path and partial obliteration of the start and end to dissuade use until it can be removed. The MCofS considers that the small extension of the path is likely to concentrate erosion in a different place, and increase access use in a new area. It is likely that this would result eventually in a significant erosion line through increased use of the slopes to the north of Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe. This option is likely to require the establishment of a full length constructed, path or repaired route on this slope in the future, which is currently relatively untouched by human artefact. The MCofS believes that this would be the long-term result of the short-term action of the short path extension. NP must take this long-term likely outcome into account in taking decisions. An alternative approach at this stage would be to rather than construct a path on the west side of the outflow, substantial stepping-stones could be provided across the outflow to encourage people to cross and descend this way. This could be done in conjunction with information at car parks (not at the outflow, which would be an inappropriate location for signs) about why descent should be made on the west side, as proposed by NP. A suitably placed stile / gate would need constructed across / in the deer fence. This would channel walkers in the lower section, but would not be visible from the top of the slope, and this would need considered in location choice. This would mean no immediate need for path construction where there is no existing established route, and not result in just extending a path that apparently goes to nowhere. It is likely that if this became a commonly used route, a desire line would develop, and the ground should be repaired where necessary. This would effectively construct a path, but could be done in as light a touch way as possible and sensitively designed to blend with the context, and appropriate to the level of use. The primary difficulty MCofS envisages with this approach, and that of a short extension, would be that it would not ensure that the desire line would take a route that would be best for an eventual path if that were necessary. However, it would be hoped with sufficient encouragement and information provision

then those descending this way may be influenced to follow a preferred line based on appropriate reasons. The caveat is that it must be transparent to access users that the “preferred route” was not taking them out of the way, nor that they had to stay on that route.

If removal of the path has been thoroughly investigated and has to be discounted, then the MCofS advises that an explanation should be made available such that sceptics of the NP proposal can be brought on board with the conclusion. If the outflow path is not to be removed, then the existing path, and that from John’s Wall along the route to the CIC Hut, must be made considerably less conspicuous as a man-made feature in the landscape, visible from a considerable distance, and a significant alien feature in the environment when descending from the summit along the zig-zags. This could be done using one or more of the following techniques:

Based on observations 2 growing seasons after construction, it is unlikely that vegetative colonisation of the path will occur naturally, probably due to a combination of construction techniques, the climatic conditions and the level of grazing. A reduction in the visual impact and attraction to users not otherwise wishing to go in that direction could be reduced through a combination of the following approaches:

1. Treatment with an appropriate dwarf grass-seed mix (SSSI restrictions permitting) with 'Seed Aid' as on Cairngorm and, if necessary, with peat won from nearby borrow pits and perhaps aggregate tamped in to protect the basal growth. Such treatment has been successful elsewhere including heavily used parts of the Pennine Way. It would need some expertise, and SNH detailed approval.
2. Reduce width of constructed path joining the “mountain track” (as NP proposed)
3. Reduce width of constructed path joining the North Face link path (as NP proposed)
4. Reduce width of constructed path at several points by embedding boulders into the edge of the path (as NP proposed)
5. Carve appropriate small direction signs on rocks at John’s wall (as NP proposed)

The MCofS believes that the marker posts and fence line have concentrated the use of the slope to the north of, and therefore are partly responsible for the patches of erosion. Hence, the MCofS supports the proposals to:

1. Remove ATV markers/mountain rescue team posts (as NP proposed)
2. Investigate removing the redundant fence with SRDP funding (as NP proposed)

Whatever the outcome of this consultation, MCofS and mountaineers in general, should continue to be invited to be involved in the process and future decisions. It is also vital that all path work go through the planning process as is normal in Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park and Cairngorms National Park (as was the diverted path on Meall a Bhuachaille). This is a National Scenic Area and one of the most important mountaineering sites in the country, as well as important for the local economy. The MCofS looks forward to a positive working relationship with Nevis Partnership in contributing the process of management of this national treasure.

Please do not hesitate to contact me to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely

Hebe Carus
Access & Conservation Officer