



# THE MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL OF SCOTLAND

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## SNH Paths Policy Consultation

### 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.

This response concerns the upland path sections of the draft statement. Similar issues arise in other open terrain as well as in native woodlands and coastal margins.

#### Vision

In order for this and future generations to enjoy the quality uplands of Scotland, the SNH Paths Policy must endeavour to deliver on behalf of the public. The MCoFS suggests that the Policy present a clearer vision of the long-term aspirations for paths in Scotland. In his Foreword to *'Repairing Upland Path Erosion'* by Peter Davies and others, Sir Chris Bonington said in 1996:

“The outer fabric of the hills is threatened with destruction from the sheer volume of feet trampling the fells.....the use we make of the hills is more than just recreation ... Reducing the numbers of people going into the hills, quite apart from being difficult to implement, must never be seen as a solution. Our need for them is too great. The challenge, therefore, is to find ways of enabling people to venture into the hills without spoiling them.”

The MCoFS supports the statements in paragraph 24, however considers that it does not appear to agree well with the opening sentence of the Vision, “paths will be better promoted...” This is desirable in the urban, suburban and enclosed rural environment, but popular mountain paths are already well promoted through many books, many websites, word of mouth and leaflets. This is (as stated in the Policy) spreading to less popular hills, bringing new erosion problems due to the concentration of promotion on particular routes. The MCoFS agrees that paths should contribute to the benefits indicated, but we would not support extension of the current promotion of upland paths. Increased promotion would be appropriate for paths which are on robust ground, can diversify opportunities, and encourage achievement of the health agenda.

The Vision includes the words, “improvements to upland paths will provide more sustainable access to our finest mountains.” In this context, the use of the word “improvement” is problematic. There is a lack of a mutual understanding among all stakeholders about what this means; to some it is a mechanism to facilitate access. The long-standing position of the MCoFS is that upland paths are not there, nor should be built, to facilitate access but to protect the upland environment while still allowing access. We would prefer replacement with the word “management.” This would encompass the necessary monitoring, repair, and maintenance of existing routes (including pre-emptive work). Improvement should be no more than incidental to overcoming erosion, access difficulties due to dense forestry, or to pre-empt increasing erosion of immediately adjoining ground. The vast majority of walkers follow the popular routes, and leaves the few more adventurous walkers and climbers to find other ways without use being concentrated to the extent that it causes fresh erosion and the need for more paths in areas of wildness. Hence, in the upland context, we

would disagree with, “support for planning and development of new paths and promoting their use.” If upland paths are to be further promoted, then it is vital that this be accompanied by a commitment to fund management of any resulting routes needing repair, else the upland path maintenance problem will just grow.

The Vision states, “Paths use helping to decrease carbon emissions in offering an alternative to motorised transport.” We appreciate the importance of this objective for urban and suburban paths, but at present unfortunately upland paths often generate private motorised transport because that is often the only practical method of reaching access points. Well publicised improvements to public transport could help reduce car use. Existing bus services passing through mountain areas could have stops at the access points. MCofS would be happy to help promote access by public transport.

### **Action for Paths in Different Settings – Upland Paths**

Paragraph 23 states, “Many of our popular mountain ranges (Cairngorms, Lochaber, Torridon, Glencoe, Loch Lomond and Trossachs) have seen extensive repair work ...” It is notable that almost all the work in these areas is on land owned by voluntary bodies such as NTS, RSPB or by government agencies such as FCS or SNH. The FCS path in the Stank Glen of Ben Ledi ends at the forestry fence with a severely eroded area beyond where walkers leave the path at its end on the ownership boundary. The MCofS considers that SNH should take a lead on meeting the challenge. Indeed, a stated priority action is, “identifying ways of prioritising paths repairs for regions and specific mountain ranges.” Priorities should not be distorted by land ownerships.

The MCofS agrees with the diagnosis of the problem in paragraph 25. We support the implementation of the proposed key priority action of seeking investment (including for maintenance), identification of additional funding streams, encouragement to access authorities to investigate opportunities with both the private sector and community groups in order to lever additional funding. In order to achieve this there needs to be a greater recognition of the wide benefits of upland path management and a clarification of how they are to be funded (e.g. economics, health, environment etc). This particularly applies to maintenance which was an issue about which SNH expressed their concerns at the ‘Reaching for New Heights’ paths conference at Glenmore Lodge in May 1998. However, it is unclear what SNH has done about this concern since, and we would urge that the actions in the policy statement be implemented with a matter of urgency.

With local authority funding struggling to meet their duties and the perceived needs of the public, it is unclear how local authorities can be expected to devote adequate funding to perceived optional work in upland areas. Path surveys from 1996 to 2008 show path managers doing their best to source funding from government agencies, EU grants, charities etc. Funded projects are usually for paths which have become so badly eroded that expensive construction is the only feasible option, and thereafter absent or inadequate maintenance starts the next cycle of decay. With no specifically-allocated funding, local authorities find more pressing needs elsewhere. In some cases new paths are being proposed when existing paths in the area desperately require maintenance. An example is at Ben A’an in the Trossachs, where a path was proposed down the far side, and another through the rough area of designated woodland on the south side, whilst the heavily-used tourist path to the summit was falling apart.

The Policy says that, “a serious consequence of this [lack of maintenance funding] is that light touch and pre-emptive works appropriate to wild land settings are passed over in favour of more heavily engineered options.” The priority action of, “improving good practice techniques and guidance, especially on light-touch pre-emptive repairs,” is likely to have little effect if there is no confidence in the required ongoing funding. In the light of this barrier, the immediate need for new trials should be reconsidered as current understanding of pre-emptive and light-touch work is fairly well-understood, as practiced by NTS and others. However, implementation needs to be supported and the information disseminated more widely such that any upland paths under consideration should have landscape-sensitive light touch or pre-emptive work as the very first option. These practices should be standard, and should be applied wherever usage and ground conditions permit.

It is now widely accepted that major pathwork should always have provision for its maintenance. In the light of this, the statement after paragraph 22 on long-distance routes that, “SNH may contribute to feasibility study and establishment costs, but will not fund ongoing management costs” is, unfortunate.

The upland environment of Scotland is a national asset which is free to all, and a context within which many people enjoy the exercise that is vital to the health of the nation. Upland path maintenance is a common good for health, biodiversity and landscape conservation. Central government funding is required. This could be delivered locally (with priorities recognised under Single Outcome Agreements in relevant local authority areas), and standards monitored by, for example, SNH. Such direct funding would also ensure that there would be an emphasis on pre-emptive and maintenance work. The Government has rightly encouraged healthy exercise, and has legislated for freedom of responsible access. Government should therefore provide the long-term means for management of this resource. The MCofS supports the efforts of the Government to increase the limit on SRDP payments for access structures. Unfortunately the complexity of the application process has kept the realisation of these benefits to a minimum, and will continue to do so even with an increased limit. Additionally, relying on private landowners to apply for grants to fund structures that benefit the public, rather than the landowner, is putting too much reliance on the good will and resources of these individuals who are already often over-stretched. It would be hoped that the mechanism for applications that benefit the general public rather than landowner, or geographically local community, be made simpler. Any grant-aided work must be competently specified and undertaken, and it is vital that there is effective quality control with an emphasis on light touch work.

The MCofS agrees with concerns about the patchy nature of appropriateness of much upland pathwork, and lack of monitoring. Unfortunately there are many examples of this. SNH themselves are sometimes part-funders or 'sponsors', who should require standards and monitor conditions (e.g. 10-year maintenance) in these circumstances. Where SNH are not directly involved, there are possibilities of agreeing with other funders to monitor on their behalf. Government agencies such as Forestry Commission Scotland, would probably welcome this.

## **Conclusion**

The MCofS congratulates SNH on its recognition of the high importance of upland paths, and the specific issues that they represent, and agree with the diagnosis of upland pathwork issues. The MCofS considers that the policy could go further by committing SNH to taking a lead in planning, funding, and monitoring effective upland path repair and ongoing management throughout Scotland.

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

Yours sincerely

Hebe Carus  
Access & Conservation Officer