

UPLAND PATH ADVISORY GROUP

SITE VISIT TO GLENMORE ON 1 SEPTEMBER 2008

Present: Fiona Cuninghame, Recreation & Access Officer, Scottish Natural Heritage
Jim Gillies, Recreation Manager, Inverness Forest District, South
Mike Elliot, Forest Craftsman
Morven Bridges, Recreation Engineer, FCS
Adam Streeter-Smith, Access Officer, Cairngorms National Park Authority
Tessa Jones, Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group
Ross Watson, RSPB warden, Abernethy
Nic Bullivant, Head Ranger, Cairngorm Ranger Service
Chris Cairns, Managing Director, Conserve (Environmental Consultants) Ltd
Mick Pawley, Countryside Senior Manager, Angus Council
Peter Moore, Area Officer, SNH
Keith Duncan, Area Officer, SNH (afternoon only)
Kevin Fairclough, Technical Officer, Paths for All Partnership
Murray Swapp, Project Officer, Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust
Mike Newbury, Member, Access & Conservation Committee, Mountaineering
Council of Scotland & Upland Path Trust (formerly BUFT) (Reporter)

The group met at the Forestry Commission Visitor Centre, Glenmore, where Jim Gillies made a presentation and distributed FCS leaflets and 'A Guide to Glenmore Forest Park'. The group then inspected the recently built path over Meall a'Bhuachaille from the visitor centre and down to Ryvoan, returning by the main track and the new off-road multi-use path, and finally inspected the recently built path from the Allt Mor car park towards Coire Cas as far as the bridge at the start of the path to the Chalamain Gap.

Meall a'Bhuachaille

Meall a'Bhuachaille (810m) is ascended by an estimated 30,000 walkers per annum. It tends to be used by moderate hillwalkers including those 'intimidated' by the high Cairngorms as well as by mountaineers for off-days and poor weather, and standing isolated, has magnificent views, particularly of the Northern Corries. It is within the Cairngorms National Park and includes a Natura Site, SSSI, and is now (2008) partially within the newly designated Glenmore NNR.

The recently-built path follows an existing eroded route, but with 2 diversions for a more sustainable line. It is within Forestry Commission (Scotland) management except for a small part near Ryvoan owned by RSPB. The route was surveyed in 2004, and after consultation with SNH, RSPB and Highland Council, work was started in May 2005 and finished in 2006. The path is 3.8km long and the work was funded to 40% by European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), and the remainder by FCS. The contractor was Conserve Ltd.

The path is waymarked at the west end as far as the forest edge, and thereafter cannot be lost except in deep snow.

The path crosses an area being clear felled. It is understood that a major path diversion had been proposed for this operation, but FCS considered that it would be difficult to deflect walkers, so arrangements were made to manage access. The timber is felled away from the route on either side, with a controlled crossing point; the trees along the path are cut in the very early morning. These arrangements appear to work very well and FCS are to be congratulated. The cleared forest will be left for 2 years, then re-planted with Scots pine plus some larch, a little spruce (for wildlife diversity) and native deciduous trees.



The new path follows the original line beside the Allt Coire Chondliach through the forest for about 1.3km. A diversion over a bridge and up further west was abandoned as it was roughly bulldozed in the 1970's on the fall line and formed an overflow torrent bed. Remnants of the old path close by the stream show that it was wet and bouldery and the new path through the forest is largely built up using some 200 tons of material extracted from a borrow pit immediately above the forest edge. The surface of the path is generally smooth with no washout of fines: it is at low gradient and the material is of schist type, which binds well.



The open Coire Chondlaich into which the path emerges, is wet and peaty, and the path was notoriously mired. The route was changed to a more sustainable line. The new path is built up, with very effective cross-drains, and the side ditches dished and grass seeded so as to be less intrusive and to control erosion.

However, as the gradient increases to about 15 degrees there are some signs of loss of finer material from the surface, with loose and upstanding stones, and some incipient gullying where the water has run down



the path surface. Some additional anchor bars and water bars are required; and in common with nearly all sloping paths in the area, surface topping will be required to make up for loss of fines. This is a common occurrence on most hill paths in recent years which is exacerbated by increased heavy summer rainfall. Perhaps this might be addressed in future design/construction of hill paths in general through adequate anchor bars and improved surface drainage.



The first section of pitching extending to about 30m. was built earlier, in 1998, by a NTS training team, in the style then prevailing – ridged and sloping and treacherous in descent. The top of this pitching is quite steep and has been avoided to produce a gully with overhanging heather on one side and the stonework of the path standing high on the other. Remedial work is required here.



Path under construction - photo Jim Gillies

The rest of the pitching throughout the whole route is all of recent construction and excellent. The material was gathered on the same hill and brought in by helicopter. It is of schist, forming square cut slabs. These are set on edge, generally in groups of twos and threes, to form adequate treads. An incipient diversion threatens to by-pass a section.



The path continues to the saddle between Creagan Gorm and Meall a'Bhuachaille, with locally won aggregate surfacing at moderate gradients and short sections of pitching. It is well contained in robust turf and heather. The dished grass-grown side drains are a notable feature.

From the saddle to the summit of the Bhuachaille, the vegetation is more sparse with surface rock and loose stones. The former erosion scar has been successfully grass-seeded, using a mix of native grass seeds. This stands out against the heather, but it is a nurse crop and heather was seen to be colonising. A section of pitching on a slightly twisting route has been well contained by mounds of stones, but there is a danger elsewhere of loose stones on the path surface causing diversions on to relatively easy ground on either side, with consequential erosion. This is particularly the case close to the summit cairn.



Descending from the summit towards Ryvoan, the path with the side slopes and wide topside ditch appears as a wide stony strip with only slow and sporadic regeneration. It seems there was no grass seeding here. There may be a case for an appropriate seed mix and 'Seed Aid' (degradable cellulose) to temporarily stabilise the surface as on Cairngorm.



Descending towards the brow of the hill the adjoining ground is peaty with short heather and there is a danger of path diversion and erosion if the path is allowed to become more stony.

There was a problem of finding the best line for the path on the brow of the hill: there was a steep, wide erosion scar superseding a loop to the east (considered vulnerable to short-cutting) above a short craggy section. The new path was therefore swung to the west, after full planning consent was sought and granted by HC and CNPA, and designed to avoid an area of the lichen known as Alpine Sulphur Tresses.



*Path under construction
-photo, Jim Gillies*

The path is then generally well-contained as it descends through deep turf and heather. There are 2 minor failures where steep sharp bends in the pitching have been avoided and these will

need remedial work. Notably there is a section of excellent but extraordinarily steep (30 degree) pitching. Below the pitching the path swings on a benched line across a slope so steep that the top side is overhanging and crumbling. Stabilisation is doubtful – some revetment walling could have been built here.



The rest of the path down to Ryvoan swings easily through deep heather and re-generation of rowan, pine, willow, juniper and birch. There is a short section of excellent pitching, well contained by revetment stonework on one side and mounds of stone on the other.

This was a rewarding opportunity on a site visit, as 3 years on from construction, the path has had time to lose its initial rawness, but on the other hand, the faults

have had time to develop. Some remedial work is clearly needed; and maintenance extending beyond the clearing of drains should be imperative, including such work as clearing loose stones and using them for stone scatter on easier ground, and blocking incipient diversions. It is understood that the FCS forest craftsman is qualified for this.

The Allt Mor Path

This path starts at the Allt Mor car park at the foot of the ski road and runs beside the stream up to the Coire Cas car park. It was built in 2002 on a new route as an off-road path for walkers. The habitat loss was compensated by the closure of an electricity wayleave. The work was facilitated by partial funding by BP under the Scottish Forest Alliance (a consortium of Woodland Trust Scotland, FCS, RSPB and BP). EAGGF, SNH, and the local enterprise company, Moray Badenoch & Strathspey Enterprise (MBSE) also contributed. The contractor was Mark Hedderwick, with stone pitching by Conserve Ltd.

From the landscaped forest car park the path crosses the ski road (with warning signs) and soon after, a spectacular bridge of timber construction with side rails on an arching steel girder across the Allt Mor. (It is to be replaced by a wider bridge for DDA purposes at a cost of £30,000.) Then there is a right turn at a junction and shortly after, a timber slatted walkway 2 metres wide and 120 metres long, over the margins of a wetland area of biological interest. This construction fully preserves the hydrology of the area. Being pressure treated, the timber is considered maintenance free in the short and medium term, and the surface was surprisingly non-slippery. It does not look out of place in the wetland/ deep forest setting.



The path continues at low gradient on a slightly twisting route through mainly young pine, rowan, birch and juniper forest with deep heather and turf. Any temporary damage resulting from machine construction in 2002 has completely disappeared and the path is closely contained by robust vegetation – in fact some cutting back is needed.



Although the path is designed for walkers and there is pitching at the top, the potential danger of collision of cyclists and pedestrians was countered by the placing of large granite boulders as obstructions to cyclists but not to walkers. Whether this is appropriate or legal was queried by some members of the visiting party in relation to both the access legislation and the Disability Discrimination Act. It would be fair to note that the Allt Mor trail was built before the Land Reform Act and therefore the issues raised relating to construction methods and the SOAC requirements are only possible with hindsight and the construction was done in good faith at the time to encourage responsible use!

The visit concluded just beyond the footbridge at the start of the path to the Chalamain Gap, where there is a section of a walkway between the bouldery stream and the foot of a steep slope of unstable boulders. The walkway is 49 metres long and of similar construction to the walkway at the swamp, but narrower and with a handrail on the stream side. The pitching higher up was not inspected.



The visiting party were impressed by this path, in particular as a secluded and interesting route through the forest, although in places close below the road. It should appeal especially as a 'long walk in' to mountaineers, and as a scenic route for less able walkers, particularly as a descent after using the bus to the Coire Cas car park. The route appeared remarkably maintenance free apart from the need to cut back encroaching vegetation.

Jim Gillies was thanked for his excellent presentation and commentaries.

Photos by Mike Newbury except where stated.

Mike Newbury