

**UPLAND PATH ADVISORY GROUP  
SITE VISIT TO CAIRNGORM  
ON 30 JULY 2008**

**Present:** Fiona Cuninghame, Recreation & Access Officer, Scottish Natural Heritage  
Nic Bullivant, Head Ranger, Cairngorm Ranger Service  
Ruari Macdonald, Seasonal Ranger, Cairngorm Ranger Service  
Chris Cairns, Managing Director, Conserve (Environmental Consultants) Ltd.  
Glyn Jones, Senior Ranger, Balmoral Estates  
Mick Pawley, Countryside Senior Manager, Angus Council  
Peter Moore, Area Officer, SNH  
Kevin Fairclough, Technical Officer, Paths for All Partnership  
Chris York, Partner, Walking-the-Talk  
Murray Swapp, Project Officer, Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust  
Gilbert McNeil, Ranger, Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park  
Matt McConway, Director, Upland Access Ltd.  
Murray Ferguson, Head of Visitor Services & Recreation  
at Cairngorms National Park Authority  
Hebe Carus, Access & Conservation Officer,  
Mountaineering Council of Scotland  
Mike Newbury, Member, Access & Conservation Committee, MCoFS,  
& Upland Path Trust (formerly BUFT)

**Reporters:** Chris York, Mike Newbury

The group met at the Cairngorm Car Park, and divided into two, one party led by Ruari Macdonald going up Cairngorm by way of the lower Coire Cas and Fiacail a'Choire Chais, and down by the summit path and Windy Ridge; and the other party led by Nic Bullivant, taking the a similar route in reverse.

The routes are each described from car park to summit, starting with the Windy Ridge route.

## **A. Windy Ridge Route**

### **1. Pitched path above car park**

At the start of the path Nic's group stopped to discuss the feasibility of using a waymarker to direct walkers to the Windy Ridge path (rather than the 'slog' up the vehicle track). Previously waymarking and promotion was prohibited by the Section 50 Agreement and Visitor Management Plan, but Nic explained that permission had now been obtained to promote the route.

There was general consensus that given the location (close to the buildings) a single discreet waymarker would not be inappropriate, but that the route should not be waymarked for its entirety.

The constructed path had been built by Bobby Donaldson in 2003, using pitching on the original evolved path. Apart from one zig-zag, there are no other zig-zags because it can't be hidden from view (i.e. it is likely that people would short-cut the zig-zags on descent). These boulder steps provide good footing, but lack containment or off-path blocking, and there has been off-path use leading to significant erosion and incipient gullyng, which has left stones standing high and liable to undermining.

Regrettably, it must be concluded that the pathwork has largely failed, and should be repaired before the erosion gets worse.



## 2. Top of pitching to Ptarmigan Restaurant

The route over the brow of the hill forms a wide erosion scar, with scattered boulders, loose stones, bare, gravelly slopes, and only scattered tufts of grass. Remedial measures are needed, but would be difficult to achieve on the open slope: a stable surface would have to be defined and off-path use discouraged in order to facilitate re-generation.



As the gradient lessens on the broad ridge, the ground is less denuded, and path definition and re-generation should be easier. Some options were discussed:

- 1) Place signs at junction asking people to use the quad track instead of the 'short cut'
- 2) Close the upper gap and hope that people find their way to the quad track (or help with signs)
- 3) Close the upper gap and define a line near the fence all the way to the quad track (landscape over existing 'short cut').



### 3. The path from Ptarmigan Restaurant to the summit boulder field

The Report on the site visit in 1998 from a BUFT/Footpath Trust Conference at Glenmore Lodge says:-

*'This is 'special case pathwork, as the proximity of the ski lift to the summit makes it primarily a path for tourists, often in large numbers, and unsuitably shod and clothed for the high and potentially dangerous environment; and of course the area is scenically compromised by the outlook over the ski developments dominating the bare, open hill. The path from the restaurant to the summit boulder field was built in the years 1994-1997 following earlier unsuccessful work. The site comprises bare grit and gravel on a slope of about 16 degrees with very little vegetation, and (previously it seems) cleared of most of the largest stones over a broad swathe. This made landscaping of the path edge difficult.*

*On account of the slope the path had to be pitched. This has been done with granite blocks forming a continuous ramp, to a uniform width of about 1.5m. on a virtually direct line with only one major curve where a clump of boulders is avoided. There are substantial stone-lined cross-drains running out to either side. A line of 1m. high posts has been erected along each side of the path, with ropes (which were not in place on the visit) to contain walkers. It is understood that without the ropes, 30-40% of visitors wander off the path, but only 3-4% with the ropes.'*

The UPAG site visitors found the pitching and posts exactly as in 1998, with a containing rope in place: the pitching style is 'of its time' for Scotland (constructed by Conserve Ltd); it is awkward in descent and potentially dangerous in icy conditions, but it appears that the expense of reconstruction would be prohibitive. However, there has been notable success in re-vegetating the denuded ground on either side. This has been achieved, with volunteer help, by careful raking off of small stones, allowing mosses and dwarf grass to spread, and re-seeding with the help of 'Seed Aid' degradable cellulose foam to temporarily stabilise the surface. General stabilisation is indicated by the long stone-lined drains, previously overwhelmed with gritty washout, which were found to be empty.



The numbers of casual visitors have been reduced since 1998 by the 'closed system' operation of the mountain railway, but the route remains popular because Cairngorm is such a notable summit, with a high start at the Cairngorm Car Park.

### 4. From the top of the pitching to Cairngorm summit

Because of the large number of inexperienced visitors and the ease of wandering off in mist from the summit into remote and difficult country, the route has been cairned. (Previous marker posts have been removed.) Path definition has been carried out by Upland Access Ltd, moving stones from the best line and placing random boulders alongside, up to the final approach to the summit cairn, where the route is over large flattish boulders.

This work appears to have been successful in defining a preferred route with a very low visual impact and continued monitoring of regeneration will help to determine the level of success.

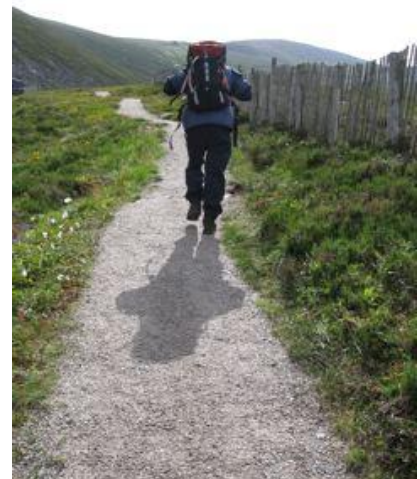


## B. The Coire Cas Route

### 1. The Lower Coire Cas Loop Trail

The route starts at the Day Lodge and ascends at a maximum gradient of 12-14 degrees alongside Allt Coire Cas towards Lyle's Well. The path was built in 2006 by Upland Contracts Ltd. and Conserve Ltd., funded by HIE with a contribution from SNH. It is surfaced with a 50/50 mix of local granite-derived material and Monadhliath schist-derived material from Alvie Quarry.

This has been notably successful: the sharp grains of schist evidently stabilise the rounded granite, so that (at this gradient) the surface shows no signs of erosion, is beginning to weather, and should colonise. Questions arise – up to what gradient, at what proportions could a schist/granite mix be successful? Could schist-derived material be mixed into existing surfacing such as on the path towards the Chalamain Gap, which, although at low gradient, shows up as a stark intrusion?



This section of path takes considerable wear, including from casual walkers and skiers.

The path verges have been re-seeded with a Rigby Taylor 'amenity' mix of dwarf and creeping grasses, with 'Seed Aid' (see above).

A short, steeper section of path follows. This is formed by a line of granite slabs on a grassed foundation with turf-lined ditches on either side. We were informed that the slabs retain a low profile so as not to intrude on ski-ing, but it does seem that it is less likely than a higher profile to divert walkers on to the verges.



There follows a section of pre-existing track (also used as a ski trail) that has been left to re-vegetate. At low gradient, this section is stable and grassing over nicely.

An extension of the loop trail is proposed through a planned area of 'mountain woodland'. There is no problem in establishing native species because of browsing deer, as their population is now virtually nil, but rabbits have become established in the area.

## 2. Coire Cas Mountain Trail

Above the Middle Station, a gravel road ascends towards the Fiacail a' Choire Chais.



Further up, the surface deteriorates and is eroding, with failed water-bars, loose stones and worn verges. Re-seeding of the verges, with the help of Seed Aid, is proving successful.



The Fiacail Path leaves the hill track by way of a zig-zag of boulder-pitched steps up a steep turf bank. The pitching is stable and grass-grown between the stones, and there is no off-path wear.



The first section of path on top of the broad Fiachail Ridge is surfaced with aggregate, which shows signs of depletion and emerging hard core. The anchor-bars are not fully adequate, but there are well-built stone-lined cross-drains and silt traps.



Next follows pitching of 3 types:-

(1) 1990's style pathwork of small sloping stones. Whilst this is uncomfortable in descent, the ground on either side comprising stones and robust turf appears to be not too badly worn.



(2) A more recent path section with larger random treads built from stone left over from the excavation of the mountain railway tunnel.



(3) The path above is constructed of large, flat boulders, the final section of which appears to have been set high, which is useful in winter conditions for identifying the line of the path, but is apparently deterring walkers from using it in the summer.



Lastly, there is an untreated slope bare denuded gravel and stones followed by boulders leading to the cairn at the top of the ridge.



### 3. Top of Fiachail Ridge to Cairngorm Summit



The untreated path comprises a broad strip of gravel and flattish stones denuded of vegetation. It has migrated sideways some 50 metres south off the watershed. It is not clear how this could best be treated – one possibility would be to use a line of boulder paving as on the Bealach separating Meikle Pap from the summit of Lochnagar.

Finally, a pathless slope of mobile stones and flattish boulders leads to the bouldery summit area of Cairngorm.



#### Path monitoring

As part of the Section 50 Agreement, there is obligatory monitoring of the impacts of visitors on the site. However, the land ownership of the summit and plateau is shared and no work has been undertaken in this area. It is recognised that there is difficulty in influencing the management of paths that do not form part of Cairngorm Estate. The value of photographic evidence for monitoring was highlighted, and the difficulty of using the Amber survey methodology for monitoring purposes - it is a relatively blunt instrument, and whilst it is very valuable in gaining a rapid overview of unsurveyed paths, the survey is not particularly easy to use in order to discern changes over time.

#### Final Discussion

Nic Bullivant highlighted that the Ranger Service has estimated that approximately £100,000 per annum is needed to fund a programme of capital repair on the estate, but suggested that the estate had received substantial amounts of public funding and that priorities may be elsewhere in the National Park. However an opposing view was expressed, that on publicly owned land it should be possible to secure funding for the demonstration of best practice, and is therefore a high priority for investment - what hope is there on privately owned estates if those in public ownership are not beacons of what can be achieved. It was suggested that the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) may have a role in advocating this. The work being done by the Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust (COAT) in prioritising upland path management was highlighted, and the significance of the Cairn Gorm paths as a visitor magnet is something that should be included in the consideration of priorities.

Some discussion focussed around whether there was agreement on how (for example) the Windy Ridge path is to be managed. The proposal is for a fully constructed line to be used, but it was not entirely clear whether this met with universal approval. Other options would require more regular management intervention, which may be risky if long-term funding cannot be secured.

The usual discussion about the need for maintenance of upland paths cropped up. There was general disappointment that this issue has not been cracked, even though everyone agrees that maintenance is a high priority, and has been discussing it for many years. It was noted that Cairn Gorm Mountain Limited (CML) has secured funding for a seasonal maintenance worker. In recognition that funders still generally make it easier to undertake capital repairs over routine maintenance, it was suggested that a more radical approach was needed.

The potential advantages (and disadvantages) of a dedicated team were discussed (whether in-house or contracted out) and the experiences of the Scotland's Mountain Heritage demonstration team were highlighted. One issue appears to revolve around the perceived 'value' or skill requirements for maintenance - on some 'full build' paths the requirement is generally for routine clearance of drainage features (low skill requirement), whereas paths that have had 'light touch' works there is a need for more highly skilled approach to ongoing management / maintenance. This should not be insurmountable, but appears to be difficult to resolve at present. There was general agreement that there is a need for dedicated resources that are not focussed on 'capital investment' - CNPA already provides direct funding to COAT and allows this resource to be towards for maintenance, and this could help to encourage others to take a similar view: a focus on outcomes rather than outputs (i.e. well managed paths rather than a specific length of construction).

The possibility of introducing parking charges at Cairn Gorm was raised as a way of generating the income needed for maintenance (and using only for this purpose). The problem is one of presentation to users - it can be difficult to persuade people to pay parking charges unless there is a clear benefit in terms of services available. However, if the generated revenue does not go to the land manager it may be easier to encourage 'participation', particularly if the scheme is 'voluntary'. One option would be to develop a similar system to that used at Spittal of Glen Muick using COAT as the intermediary, and for funds to be channelled directly into maintenance / management of the paths. This would require interpretation for the public and support from the user community (e.g. Mountaineering Council for Scotland) in advocating the need for this approach would be particularly helpful. Nic agreed to take forward this issue with CML.

Chris York, Mike Newbury