



**Outdoor  
Access Trust  
for Scotland**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**

**2019 / 2020**

**Photo: Brodie Hood**



# Applause for hard work in the face of adversity

## Foreword from the Chairman

A successful, safe return to work after lockdown means we really can celebrate a great year for OATS despite problems caused by Coronavirus.

Teams have been back at work on paths on Lochnagar, Ben More at Crianlarich, and the Storr, and the Fairy Pools toilet block on Skye will be complete in the very near future.

Our car-parking staff have also been back on duty – and hard at it, as visits to Scotland's countryside soared. It has never been more clear just how essential it is to provide basic facilities for access in the countryside, and it is extremely encouraging to see the car parks generating much needed revenue after a collapse in income from April to June this year.

In addition, OATS volunteering re-started in early September, with regular Wednesday sessions to ensure our paths are maintained and path users can give something back.

Sadly our conference to celebrate the completion of The Mountains and The People project, already rescheduled from May to October, has been delayed again due to Covid restrictions. We hope to run it in the coming year.

Nevertheless we should applaud the work of the staff, contractors, volunteers and trainees who will complete the

UK's biggest ever path scheme by the end of December. Another cheer should go to the team that completed the Speyside Way extension, now no doubt getting good use.

It is important people know a great deal of time, money and hard work goes into making sure they can use the countryside without damaging it. To that end OATS has broadened its publicity drive since the start of 2020, gaining coverage in Scottish and UK national media, and hopes to build on that work, to help drive up donations and volunteers support from countryside users.

Those donations, plus fundraising via trailhead facilities such as the Glen Muick and Fairy Pools car parks, will be essential in the future as OATS' mountain-path work moves to areas outside National Parks.

The hard work of our staff and contractors has seen us achieve great success this year. I thank them for that and trust they will help the organisation advance for the next 12 months.

**Ian Moffett**  
**October 2020**



## Many thanks to our supporters



# The outdoors investment gap must be bridged

## OATS CEO Dougie Baird reflects on the future

The sheer weight of people using the outdoors this year has shown the desperate need for OATS to build basic infrastructure – footpaths, car parks and toilets – in the countryside.

In recent years, problems across Scotland's countryside with parking, fouling, and erosion of popular trails have been growing. The rush outdoors post-lockdown, bringing with it many new people to the countryside, starkly highlighted the chronic lack of investment in access infrastructure that is so clearly needed.

Helping to fill that gap is the challenge – and opportunity – for OATS. Our seed-corn funding can provide the basis for projects around which the increasingly limited funds of Government agencies can coalesce, along with private donations and sponsorship.

As we have shown in Skye and Aberdeenshire, building facilities that protect the trailhead environment raises money for path work and habitat regeneration, further protecting the environment. This virtuous circle is an important model for future development of the basic infrastructure that is so badly needed in the countryside.

This year's growth is likely to bring a permanent rise in countryside use, as a new generation realise what is on their doorstep. That's



That means we need greater awareness among hill walkers and climbers that the access infrastructure they use must be paid for. We will be laying down the challenge to them to step up and protect the environment against damage they themselves cause.

We also need buy-in from private landowners. Our working relationship with both the royal estate at Balmoral and the nearby Dinnet and Kinord estate have been very positive in generating income and support for local path building and renovation projects. We are in negotiations with others as the need to work together will clearly be vital for the future.



great for health and wellbeing but means pressure on new areas closer to towns and cities. OATS is keen to ensure these lower, more accessible areas get help as well as mountains and remote places.

Many of our new countryside users may not be aware of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Through interpretation, volunteer and trainee programmes, and workers on the ground, OATS can help educate and inform people about how to treat the precious resource that is Scotland's countryside.

One of our next big challenges will be raising money for mountains outside the National Parks where funding partners will be even scarcer.

Partnerships with local communities and others are fundamental to project development and buy-in. The collaboration between the Minginish Community Hall Association and OATS to develop, build and manage essential car parking and public toilets at the Fairy Pools on Skye is the perfect model going forward.

The development of the Rural Tourism and Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) by the Scottish Government has been a great initiative. It has provided funds for the Fairy Pools toilet building, and the paths at Storr on Skye and Criffel in Dumfries and Galloway. This has been a fantastic help in getting new projects, with sustainability at their core, off the ground – it should become a permanent fixture.



## TMTP: How we've carried out the UK's biggest path project

### The People ...

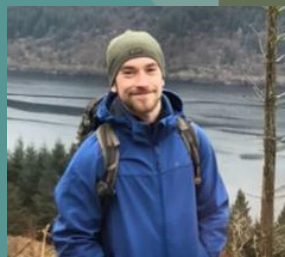
With sustaining the path-building workforce and engaging with volunteers as major aims, The Mountains and The People project (TMTP) has had a big impact on people's lives.

The project, which is just drawing to a close, has trained 42 people in path building and conservation. 315 volunteers contributed almost 1400 working days of path surveying, maintenance and light construction.



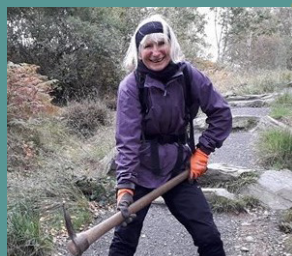
Among those who gained their level 2 SVQ in Environmental Conservation on the scheme is Ryan Hamilton, now running a contracting business which has been hard at work on TMTP sites. Ryan, 34, from Tighnabruaich in Cowal, swapped working in a call centre for the great outdoors: "I knew I wanted to set up my own company in this

industry," he says. "Through the skills I learned on the course and working with other path teams I believed I had more to offer."



Former metal fabricator Craig Paterson, 29, also saw a big change as a result of the six-month course. "I found something that I could enjoy for the rest of my life," he says. After the course he found work building paths and took on OATS's SVQ level 3 work-based

qualification aimed at supervisory roles.



TMTP volunteers were and still are involved in path-building and maintenance. Keen hillwalker Pat Brechin, 68, from Edinburgh, has done maintenance on TMTP over three years. She said: "I just liked the idea of giving something back. You want to contribute

something to the wellbeing of the mountains – I'm one of the thousands of people wearing these hills out."



Gill Walker, 33, from Balfron in Stirlingshire, is carving a successful career in conservation and recreation management after completing the course. "It helped me to get a thorough understanding of many different and varied

career options within land management," she says. "Having the opportunity to test the water with work placements helped me to find where my strengths lie."

### The Mountains ...

The Mountains and The People project spent £5.6 million to build and repair more than 140k of footpaths on 44 sites in the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs and Cairngorms national parks.

Raising the cash has been a mountain to climb in itself but the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the two national park authorities, Forestry and Land Scotland, and NatureScot all chipped in, along with £808,000 from OATS' own fundraising efforts.

TMTP has taken in major hills such as Ben More at Crianlarich, Lochnagar in Aberdeenshire, and the Cobbler at Arrochar, along with lower routes through wild country such as Jock's Road in the Cairngorms and Glen Finglas in the Trossachs.

Around 40% of the work was carried out at 23 sites in the



And after volunteering and training with TMTP, Damien Theaker now helps lead volunteer maintenance with Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. He liked the OATS approach: "Rather than just walking away from the project once the capital work

was completed, like so often happens, and then the whole thing falls into disrepair, what they were saying was 'we have invested all this time and money, now what we want to do is keep an eye on it'."

Cairngorms. The remaining 60% was at 21 sites in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs park.

It is the UK's largest single path-building project, completing the work to protect the busiest national park routes which began with the Eastern Cairngorms Access Project in 2003.

# Fairy Pools: Car Park and Toilets are go!

The car park at the Fairy Pools in Glen Brittle on Skye is now complete and the toilets will be ready for use in a month's time – despite blue clay, coronavirus, and growing crowds of visitors.

Instead of the hordes of visitors having few or no facilities – with all the attendant problems for local people – the car park can now take 140 vehicles and the toilets will be able to cope with 200,000 people a year!

The construction process was not without its issues. The first problem was blue clay covering the site, which was dug out and replaced with 13,000 tons of aggregate, 60% more than expected. Thanks to Forestry and Land Scotland, we could quarry the material locally, which was vital to the logistics and finances of the project.

Since the project was conceived in 2017 annual visitors to the Fairy Pools have soared from an already-unsustainable 80,000 to more than 180,000 in 2019. This has been exacerbated by the increase in UK travellers visiting Skye following international travel restrictions.

The planned toilet facilities and off-grid sewage system had to be drastically upgraded to allow for the increase, the capacity of the processing tank being doubled. The submarine-size tank, 30 metres long, needed a 250-tonne crane to manoeuvre it into place.

We also had to negotiate with the neighbouring landowner to build a 450-metre soakaway that went under the road and into their land.

The final challenge, of course, was the break in work caused by lockdown, but our teams were back on site as soon as it was safe to be. Covid concerns have delayed the official opening until next year, when we hope to celebrate this landmark project properly.

To fund this construction project OATS raised more than £720,000 from sources including LEADER, Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF), and OATS' own funds.



## How OATS leads the way in funding and community partnerships

OATS is at the forefront of finding ways to produce the sustainable paths and trailhead facilities growing numbers of visitors to the countryside need, and the Fairy Pools development is a perfect example.

In 2017 a partnership between the Minginish Community Hall Association (MCHA) and OATS was set up to develop, build and manage the much-needed access facilities in Glen Brittle.

MCHA used the new Community Asset Transfer mechanism to acquire the site from Forestry and Land Scotland. They lease the site to OATS, and we project-managed construction and took on operation of the car-park and toilets.

This collaborative model shows how effective third-sector partnerships can address the chronic lack of tourist infrastructure

in remote rural areas, while providing sustainable future funds for conservation and community objectives.

Fairy Pools car-parking fees now fund two full-time staff, rent to MCHA, and the cash to cover the extra unforeseen costs of building the toilets.

Surplus revenue has already helped the development of the new Skye Iconic Sites Project initiative. We will shortly be announcing details of this major access, conservation and interpretive project at The Fairy Pools, The Old Man of Storr and The Quiraing.

Fairy Pools revenue will continue to provide seed corn funding for access, infrastructure and conservation projects for years to come.



# On the ground: How we've protected hills and improved access

## Major work on big hills

The last phases of The Mountains and The People involved work this year on some of our biggest and best-loved hills.

The Ben More main path project has presented particular problems associated with a long, continuously steep slope on thin, peaty soil, on a very accessible hill. The grassy nature of the hillside meant stone had to be sourced from a nearby dyke and flown in.

Work got going on this in 2018 and continued into 2019 and 2020, with the team getting straight back to finish it off as soon as they could after lockdown this summer.

The relentlessly steep nature of the ground has meant over 700m of stone pitching has had to be constructed, but what's been left is an attractive unobtrusive trail which protects the delicate environment around it.

On the Balmoral Estate the Glas Allt path, Glas Allt bridge and Lochnagar main path were all completed in the past year. OATS worked in close consultation with the head ranger of the estate, Glyn Jones, to ensure path design and build met the needs of the estate as well path users. His knowledge and input were invaluable throughout the work.

The bridge and path on the Glas Allt on the south-east side of Lochnagar, about 700m up, had been undermined by increasingly frequent heavy rainfall events and were finally wrecked in Storm Frank.

Remoteness meant all the work to replace the bridge with a sturdier version had to be done by hand, and all the materials had to be flown in. The bridge has been significantly 'scaled up' with the top of the new abutments located at the height of the walking deck of the old bridge, to cope with expected worsening weather.

The Glas Allt path was repaired to match the remaining historic estate path. Nearly all the stone for pitching and all the aggregate had to be sourced locally and brought to the site.

We also tackled repair and rebuilding on the main path to the summit of Lochnagar from where it branches off the Land Rover track.

Much of the path had been built in the early 90s and had been maintained by Balmoral rangers, but heavier work was needed including resetting water-bars and cross-drains. Some light-touch work such as shifting rocks to make clear the path across a boulder field was also needed.



Ben More, Crianlarich  
Photo: Brodie Hood



Glas Allt Bridge, Aberdeenshire



Storr Path, Isle of Skye



Ruthven Barracks, Speyside Way



Criffell path, Dumfries and Galloway



## Help from the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund

The Scottish Government's Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) has been a welcome addition to funding sources. Among the OATS schemes it has helped is the project to construct a new path on Criffell in Dumfries and Galloway, a new region for OATS work.

OATS was consultant project manager for the scheme, in partnership with Dumfries and Galloway Council, which had a £300,000 budget to build a decent path up a popular hill.

When OATS started on site in July the path was a muddy, slippery, wet, undefined trod. The contractors have now almost completed 1400m of path, much of it machine built with hand-built pitching. Almost all materials had to be flown in. The site was so wet some sections had to be "floated" on geotextile.

RTIF also helped with the new path on the Storr, where a different set of problems was found. The path and surrounding areas were so badly braided and worn the team struggled to find enough turf for landscaping, and the number of visitors who still wanted to

get to the Old Man of Storr during construction meant a constant management problem.

But the resulting path incorporates on-site stone and turf features to create a path that really connects users to their surroundings and improves the experience.

## Other schemes across the country

Completing the Speyside Way extension was another major OATS milestone in the past year.

The scheme in partnership with the Cairngorms National Park involved innovative bridge-building, working around rail infrastructure and some difficult dealing with land owners, all done successfully to produce a 22.5km cycling and walking trail between Aviemore and Kingussie.

Working with the Coigach and Assynt Living Landscapes partnership in north-west Scotland, OATS has completed a couple of challenging schemes, to improve the Postie's Path and Auncheninver Path loop at Achiltibuie. We have also drawn up plans for improvements to the Fox Point path at Old Dorney.

## Final thoughts from the CEO...

This has been such a challenging year, with major projects such as The Mountains and The People and the Fairy Pools facilities construction project in their closing phases. We have a number of exciting new initiatives being developed to move into the new decade with. We had good processes and plans in place to achieve these. None of us saw COVID coming along, who could really? Like most of the rest of the country our projects came to a screeching halt on 24th March 2020.

They say you don't really see the quality of people until you see how they cope in adversity and there has been a terrific

and enduring charms of open and wild country. The projects and admin staff have worked right through, adjusting working practices and making do and mend with homeworking to keep the show on the road. We focussed on how to safely get our sites up and running as soon as Government guidelines allowed us to. Working with Scotland's excellent contractors we were able to restart on 1st June and the end is in sight in the coming weeks for our major projects.

Our volunteer work teams returned with revised safety systems in place, and we are delighted to see the demand from the



response across the spectrum of OATS activity. Our Trustees are all volunteers. They rallied with meetings taking place all the way through lockdown to help chart a new way through the year, with various budget scenarios projected and then refined as events unfolded. I think this year has added a zero onto the number of hours they have given to help our Trust through.

Our car park staff were furloughed and re-emerged as lockdown eased only to find that there was a whole new home-based visitor clientele desperate to escape to Skye and the remote

people to come and help look after Scotland's mountain paths. We are planning on running weekly volunteer days right up until Christmas this year.

I'd also like to thank our many appeal donors, including the Bryce Family, and our two corporate sponsors - TAQA and Brewdog. It is not an easy time to give and I am so grateful for the support received. We all need the great outdoors, and we all need to be prepared to give something back to look after it. At the end of the day that is what The Mountains and The People was all about.



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