



Outdoor
Access Trust
for Scotland



ANNUAL REPORT

2020 / 2021

A year of major achievements

Foreword from the Chairman

The past year has been one of major achievements by OATS, and there's plenty in the pipeline to ensure more in future years.

The Mountains and The People (TMTP) project finally ended, after Covid delays, at the end of 2020. The final appraisal of this, the UK's biggest-ever programme of mountain path works, shows what a resounding success it was: <https://www.outdooraccesstrustforscotland.org.uk/resources>.

This year we had the official opening of the Fairy Pools Car Park and toilets, the creation of which was a massive undertaking. It demonstrated the strength of working with the community to protect the environment and enhance the experience of visiting wild sites in Scotland.

The cost of off-grid toilets is high – for the Fairy Pools it was £441,000. However, the standard has to be high enough to safeguard the natural environment, and give the high level of experience visitors are entitled to expect.

The teams involved in these projects are to be congratulated on their success: they have shown just what can be achieved by a small specialist charity such as ours with dedicated work and determination.

Going forward we have two new trailhead schemes in the pipeline. Development work is at an advanced stage on a new car park and toilets at Stac Pollaidh in Coigach, one of the most accessible and dramatic mountain walks. It has proved ever more popular over the past two summers as the Highlands filled with visitors who in other years may have gone abroad.

We are pushing forward with a new trailhead car park at Beinn a' Ghlo in Perthshire, where a considerable length of footpath over three Munros was restored and repaired as part of TMTP.

On Skye we have had a total of £1.86m worth of projects on the books since 2018, with OATS contributing £256,000.

Work continues apace on the Skye Iconic Sites Project, with path restoration, interpretive signage and environmental restoration at the Fairy Pools, the Old Man of Storr and the Quiraing. The total cost of this is approaching £1m and it demonstrates how well we can work with other agencies.

It is heartening for me to see the charity in such good shape as I am standing down as chair at our AGM this year and as a trustee next year after eight eventful years.

My hope is that OATS continues to punch above its weight and fulfil its potential as a major force for protecting and enhancing the Scottish countryside and the experience visitors have of it.

Ian Moffett
October 2021



New projects in the pipeline

A Stac of work

Work should start winter 2021 on the new OATS car park at Stac Pollaidh in Coigach, Sutherland. The planning application and ecological impact assessment are under way, and fundraising has begun towards the estimated £500,000 cost of 78 new car parking spaces and a planned toilet block. Income from the site will provide seed capital and contribute towards both external funding shortfalls and the essential work to protect Stac Pollaidh and the path up it from as many as 50,000 visitors a year.

Match parking

A planning application has been granted for the new OATS car park for walkers on Beinn a' Ghlo in Perthshire, to match its new TMTP paths. Around 60 parking spaces are to be provided.

Munro challenge

OATS is exploring an exciting new project on An Teallach, the double-Munro ridge above Dundonell, south of Ullapool. Its badly eroded paths lie on private ground, making fundraising more challenging. Talks have started with the British Mountaineering Council and Mountaineering Scotland on a path and parking scheme funded largely by hill-users.

John O'Groats Way

OATS is preparing to take a lead role in the ground-breaking project to establish the John O'Groats Way as an important addition to Scotland's network of long-distance paths. Plans and fundraising are already under way to build a 2km stretch of the trail from Noss Head near Wick to Sinclair Bay.

Destination creation: Finance Secretary Kate Forbes opens Fairy Pools Car Park

The formal opening of the Fairy Pools car park and toilets on Skye by Finance and Economy Secretary Kate Forbes marked a big step towards establishing OATS as a major force in sustainable development of tourism infrastructure in remote areas.

Opening the 148-space car park and off-grid toilet block at the popular visitor attraction in Glen Brittle in July this year, Ms Forbes said: "Scotland has world-leading legislation giving people rights to access our countryside, but it's important that these are exercised responsibly and with respect for others, for wildlife and for the land itself.

"Investing in visitor management and supporting our rural communities is a crucial part of sustainable tourism growth."

OATS was responsible for raising £794,064 for the scheme and delivering the construction work. Despite challenges stemming from the site's remote location, ground conditions, and constantly increasing visitor numbers, the new facilities have been fully operational since October 2020.

The project was developed in response to a long-term lack of basic infrastructure at the internationally renowned tourist destination. With a totally unsustainable 180,000 recorded visitors to the site in 2019, the narrow single-track access road was regularly blocked with parked cars, verges were damaged and local residents, businesses and emergency services had to deal with significant disruption. This also led to path and habitat degradation, litter and human fouling issues.

The development project was spearheaded by OATS and Minginish Community Hall Association (MCHA), the local community volunteer organisation. MCHA was one of the first organisations to make use of the Community Asset Transfer scheme to acquire the land from Forestry and Land Scotland. The land was then leased to OATS for the next 20 years on the condition that they construct the car-park and toilets, and operate and maintain the site and facilities. OATS had the experience, expertise and capacity to deliver the scheme and handle the liabilities.



L to R - Dougie Baird OATS, Alaistar Nicolson HIE, Ian Moffett OATS, Finance and Economy Secretary Kate Forbes, John Finlayson Highland Council, Henrik Micski MCHA, Graham Campbell MCHA, Sandra Reid Forestry and Land Scotland

OATS Chief Executive Dougie Baird said: "The hugely successful landlord/tenant collaboration forged between MCHA and OATS is the perfect model to demonstrate how effective third-sector partnerships can address the issues caused by the lack of infrastructure at popular visitor destinations.

"As well as actively protecting important and fragile assets in remote locations and ensuring visitors enjoy a positive experience, this project generates revenue that will continue to provide funds for local community objectives and local and national environmental conservation. The legacy for the Fairy Pools project will be significant."

Since opening with the first 100 parking spaces in January 2019, and despite closing for Covid-19 lockdowns, the car park has already generated enough revenue to pay for two full-time and eight casual support staff, the rent, PPE equipment, an onsite defibrillator, and further site infrastructure development costs. The operating surplus is being re-invested as seed-corn funding for access and conservation work including for the new Skye Iconic Sites Project, and funding local community benefit projects.



L to R - Ian Moffett, Chair OATS
Finance and Economy Secretary Kate Forbes
Niki Maclean, Fairy Pools Facility Manager OATS
Dougie Baird, CEO OATS

Skye Iconic Sites Project gets the green light!

The ambitious £900,000-plus scheme to tackle problems at three key tourist sites on Skye, led by OATS, has finally got the go-ahead after confirmation of £650,516 funding from NatureScot's Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund (NCHF).

The rest of the funding for the Skye Iconic Sites Project (SISP) comes from OATS (£98,793), Scottish Government Rural Payments Inspections Division (SGRPID) (£150,000), the Minginish Community Hall Association (MCHA) (£20,000), and Highland Council (£10,000).

What is SISP?

SISP, a two-year project delivered and managed by OATS, will address the chronic lack of tourist infrastructure and co-ordinated interpretation on Skye, improving the visitor experience at three of its busiest destinations – the Old Man of Storr, the Quiraing and the Fairy Pools themselves.

The development of access infrastructure – new accessible paths, bridges, and viewpoints – will help a more diverse range of people enjoy the sites. At the same time a comprehensive programme of habitat restoration and rehabilitation work will arrest and reverse environmental degradation caused by visitor footfall.

With accessible and coordinated information and interpretation at each site, including the authentic and sympathetic use of Gaelic language and culture, the project will give visitors a more fulfilling experience.

The interpretation plan will also include promotion, marketing and joined-up thinking within the wider context of Skye as a tourist destination.

SISP is one of four projects to get a slice of the £2.6 million EU cash pot to promote the outstanding scenery, wildlife and culture of the Highlands and islands through NCHF.

How did SISP come about?

In recent years Skye's economy has enjoyed soaring tourist numbers, but that has come at a price: a lack of the most basic infrastructure and tourist facilities at the most popular attractions has led to environmental damage, negative publicity and disruption to Skye's communities and businesses.

As a result, in 2018 the Skye Iconic Sites Project initiative was set up by OATS, Skye Connect (Skye's destination management organisation), the Staffin Trust, MCHA, Highland Council, and SGRPID (the principal landowner). This informal collaborative alliance recognises the importance of providing sustainable and long-term solutions to the growing pressure on natural heritage attractions. Such solutions mean they can be enjoyed in the coming decades by all, whilst at the same time easing the extreme pressure of tourism on the local communities.

OATS hopes that SISP will become an industry template for achievable, sustainable management of tourism development projects in remote and fragile locations.



Trialling seed collection techniques at the Old Man of Storr



Bridging the gap: How Ian Moffett has helped drive OATS forward as chair and trustee

"I regret the expense but don't in any way regret the principle, of looking after endangered bits of the Highlands," says Ian Moffett.

On the eve of his retirement as chair of the OATS board of Trustees, he is speaking of the £441,000 needed to build the off-grid toilets at Fairy Pools on Skye, one of the major achievements of recent years.

But he could be talking about almost any of the work OATS has been involved in in the eight years he has been on the board, six of them as chair.

Bridging the gap between scarce cash and the ever-growing need to protect the countryside has been the principle theme of Ian's spell with OATS. He is also stepping down as a trustee next spring after serving the maximum term.

His first year with OATS saw the initiation of The Mountains and The People, the project that dominated OATS' work for more than six years.

Ian is delighted and proud the £5.6m project has been such a success – especially the training and volunteering aspects of it. But money is always a headache: "The funding is interesting: we



nothing happens until you have another big project to sort it all out again," he says.

He hopes ongoing maintenance can become more a part of OATS' future, with car-parks including the new ones at Stac Pollaidh and Beinn A Ghlo providing a steady stream of cash not tied to one project, and available for a range of work.

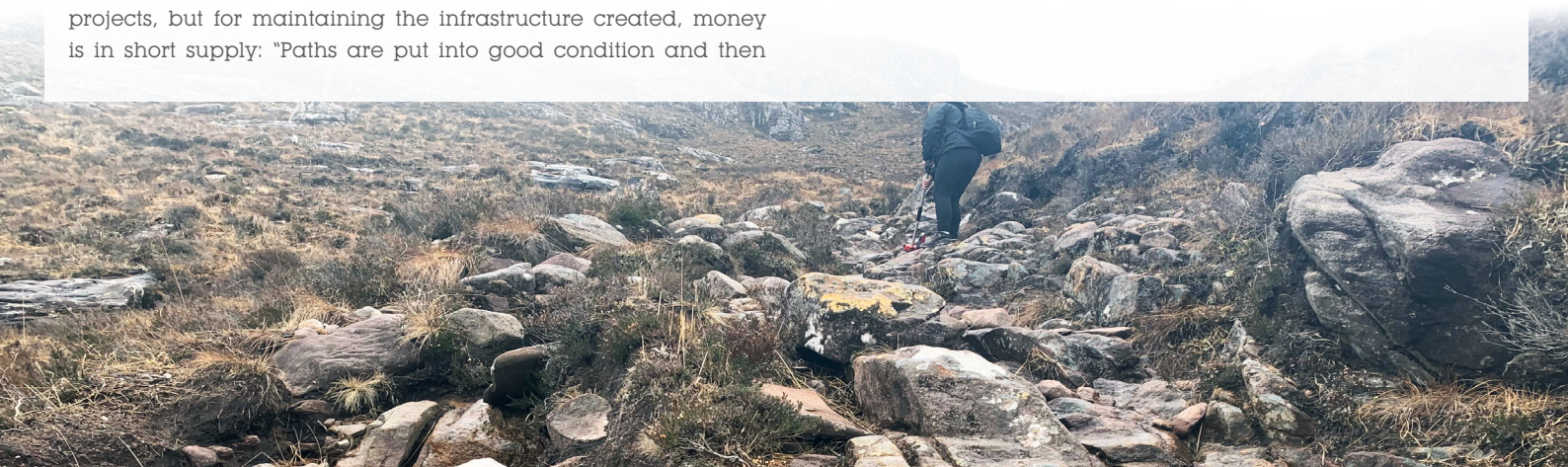
The Fairy Pools car-park and toilets is another source of satisfaction for the retired solicitor, who lives in Kingussie, but he points out the car-park has already needed maintenance, with the track connecting the sections having to be tarmaced.



get the contributions agreed, and we put in the balance – then there's the excitement that that's based on estimated figures," he says drily.

Another headache is that funding bodies put up cash for major projects, but for maintaining the infrastructure created, money is in short supply: "Paths are put into good condition and then

The work – and the fundraising – sometimes seems unending, but he is sure OATS has a bright future under new chairman Duncan Bryden: "There are councils all over Scotland asking us to assist them, and that's a huge opportunity. There is no doubt OATS and its unique way of doing things will be very much in demand."



The Mountains and The People Final Evaluation Report published



PARTNERSHIP

The £5.6M project was led, inspired, initiated, planned and built by OATS, in partnership with:

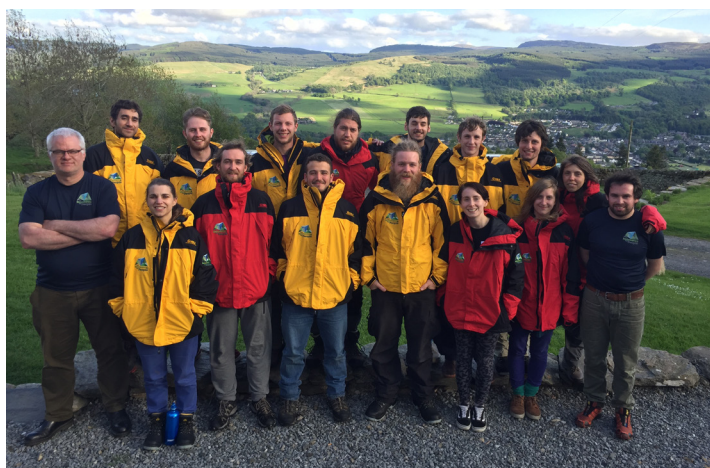
- Cairngorms National Park Authority
- Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority
- Forestry and Land Scotland
- NatureScot
- The National Lottery Heritage Fund - 58% of project funding



PATHS

120,978 metres of path built or rebuilt

- 43% in Cairngorm National Park
- 57% in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park
- 85% hand-built
- 15% machine-built



TRAINING

- 36 trainees completed SVQ2 in environmental conservation
- Five trainees completed SVQ3 in environmental conservation



VOLUNTEERING

- 203 volunteer work parties completed
- 45 paths adopted by volunteers through Adopt A Path scheme
- 1502 volunteer work-days completed



The Mountains and The People is the largest and most complex upland path project ever to be undertaken in the UK

The project figures opposite are impressive. All of them and more are detailed in the final evaluation report for The Mountains and The People, available on the OATS website – <https://www.outdooraccesstrustforscotland.org.uk/resources/>.

But the numbers are just part of the report's story.

It highlights how TMTP has given a major boost to the importance of path-building in the minds of land managers, path users, and public bodies.

to engage with visitors, and how the project helped spread the word about path-building and its importance through the media.

The evaluation also talks about some of the difficult areas which have given OATS as an organisation valuable lessons, such as how to best deal with a wide range of stakeholders and the levels of management of individual sites that is needed.

And the report said the project will leave a lasting legacy in a range of ways.

“A major student feedback trait was the extent to which the course built student confidence through moving from learning to practitioner on a daily basis”

TMTP Final Evaluation

The project has raised recognition of the economic importance of mountain paths, helped partner organisations get their messages across, boosted the path-building industry and inspired trainees and volunteers who took part.

Most of the trainees are now working in path-building and conservation, and their account of their experience in the report is inspiring: “It made me feel stronger and feel I can deal mentally with challenges,” said one, while another said: “It offered something you could put your heart into and get rewarded for, where you are inspired into motivating yourself.”

Volunteers said working on TMTP was “a great way to give something back to the mountains” and enjoyed the diversity among their fellow volunteers, with the scheme being called “a brilliant way to meet new, interesting and like-minded people.”

One regular volunteer, Euan Ramage, now works in path building, he said: “TMTP opened a door for me to fulfil a dream, to finish my working days out on the mountains.”

The report highlights the digital education pack produced to tie in with schools and colleges, the work done within TMTP

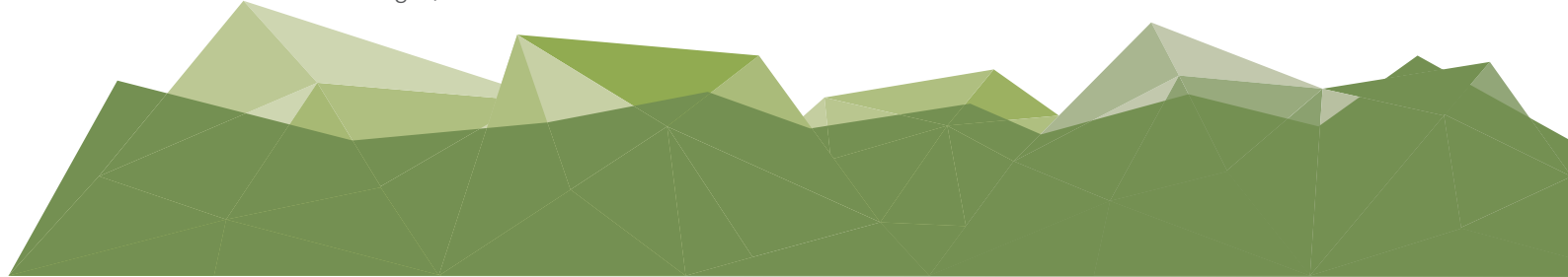
It has created a model for training, developed a young workforce who will be in the profession for decades, and helped teach young people to value our mountains.

The continuing Adopt a Path programme could grow to

“There’s a need to build awareness about mountain path pressures across frequent mountain path users”

TMTP Final Evaluation

cover the whole of Scotland, and TMTP helped make the case for paths to be regarded as strategic public land assets by planners, paving the way for a more extensive paths network.



Paying your way: How can we find the the funding to pay for paths and protection?

OATS CEO Dougie Baird lays down a challenge

The past 18 months have seen an explosion of people exploring the countryside. Covid lockdowns, international travel restrictions, and a desire to reconnect with nature in the face of the pandemic have fuelled the rush.

The impact on the Scottish countryside has been huge. Whilst it is great to see so many people enjoying the hills it does result in many more pairs of boots eroding the natural habitats of these special places. OATS is determined to provide solutions that mean Scotland's peatlands and fragile habitats are recovered and protected not just for landscape values, but also as a contribution to the wider objectives on these habitats potential for carbon storage.

Even before the pandemic, access infrastructure in many areas was becoming unsustainable because of growing use and a critical lack of investment in paths and trailhead car-parking and toilets.

The result is a growing sense of crisis, with boggy, braided mountain footpaths, landowners rightly complaining about fouling, damage caused by informal parking, and residents, businesses and emergency services dealing with significant disruption on key access roads.



OATS has a wealth of expertise and experience in finding solutions to these issues. Lessons learned on The Mountains and The People, and the profile that project has given to high-grade path-building, mean we are in a strong position to help resolve access and visitor management issues throughout Scotland.

Charging a modest sum for car-parking which is then ploughed directly back into developing facilities such as paths and toilets is one excellent way we have learned to do this. We are expanding this model, with plans at an advanced stage at Stac

Pollaidh in Coigach and at Beinn a' Ghlo in Perthshire, and other sites being investigated.

Government can help by ensuring we can get access to sites through community asset transfers, as has happened at the Fairy Pools car-park and toilets and now at Stac Pollaidh.

But it needs much, much more buy-in from outdoor users. People new to the countryside, who typically flock to honeypot sites, must be educated to realise if they pitch up at a car-park that's overflowing, they need a plan B, to go elsewhere.

And a little bit of planning – going early in the day, or later, to avoid busy times – can save them that dilemma in the first place.

The fragility of much of our uplands means there are badly damaged paths, and major path scars, in places where the footfall is relatively low, mainly from seasoned outdoor users, and parking won't pay for maintenance.

Many of those regular walkers and climbers think nothing of spending hundreds or even thousands of pounds on equipment to stay safe, and pay handsomely again for food, drink and travel.

By comparison the sums needed from them to pay for path maintenance are small. While access to the hills must remain free to ensure everyone can enjoy it, those who can do so must be expected to make a direct contribution to the infrastructure

that sustains their activity.

OATS can see a growing need for footpath-building projects outwith the national parks and charity-owned estates, where grant funding is increasingly hard to access.

That's when the outdoor-using public, who fully appreciate the beauty of Scotland's natural environment, will need to step up and support our work with hard cash, to create the infrastructure they need and to protect the environment they love.



Final thoughts from the CEO...

It has been a very difficult year for everyone due to COVID and the difficult conditions and uncertainty that this has brought into all of our lives. OATS has had a challenging time too, whilst still needing to deliver and complete major projects including The Mountains and The People (TMTP). We could not just stop everything and stand by until it all washes over! Our chair and Board of Trustees have put more time in to the Trust in the last 18 months as volunteers than anyone should be reasonably expected to, and I thank them wholeheartedly for their support, diligence and steadfastness in the midst of this public health crisis. They have helped us keep the show on the road with very regular Board meetings held throughout as we chart our way through the pandemic.

Ian Moffett steps down as chair this year after six years at the helm, and his patience and understanding have been invaluable, as has his constant and dedicated support for the Trust throughout his time in the hot seat!

Our staff have really stepped up to the plate in difficult circumstances. Murray Swapp has worked tirelessly in the background to keep projects moving from his kitchen table. Niki, Tony and our seasonal staff at the Fairy Pools on Skye have had a challenging time with very busy periods, particularly during the holidays, and sadly not everyone has behaved well to them. Staff from all walks of life who work with the public have found it difficult this last year and a half, and I can only thank our car-park staff from the bottom of my heart for their forbearance.

I would also plead with future visitors who all wish to go to the same place at the same time to please treat people working in public spaces as they would wish to be treated themselves.

Lastly, we have completed a swathe of work in difficult circumstances, and in particular two major projects in TMTP and the Fairy Pools car-park and toilets project. This has only been possible with the financial support of public organisations such as the National Park Authorities, NatureScot, Forest and Land Scotland, Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Scottish Government. The corporate sponsorship received from TAQA and Brewdog, the Charitable Trust support received from The Scottish Mountaineering Trust, Scotways, Browne Forbes Memorial Fund, Access and Conservation Trust, The Gannochy Trust, and the many individuals who donated to our Mountain Path Appeal has been invaluable in helping us complete our projects and objectives.

As we look ahead to the future, it is clear that we will continue to seek out diverse partnerships on future initiatives with community groups, public sector, third sector and private landowners. In many ways the innovative partnership with Minginish Community Hall Association at the Fairy Pools has shown how this can be done. We are looking to develop new partnerships with key players at Stac Pollaidh, Beinn A Ghlo and for the John O'Groats Way. If there is one thing we can take away from this pandemic, it is just how important the countryside is to all of us for our health and wellbeing and that it needs investment and to be looked after!

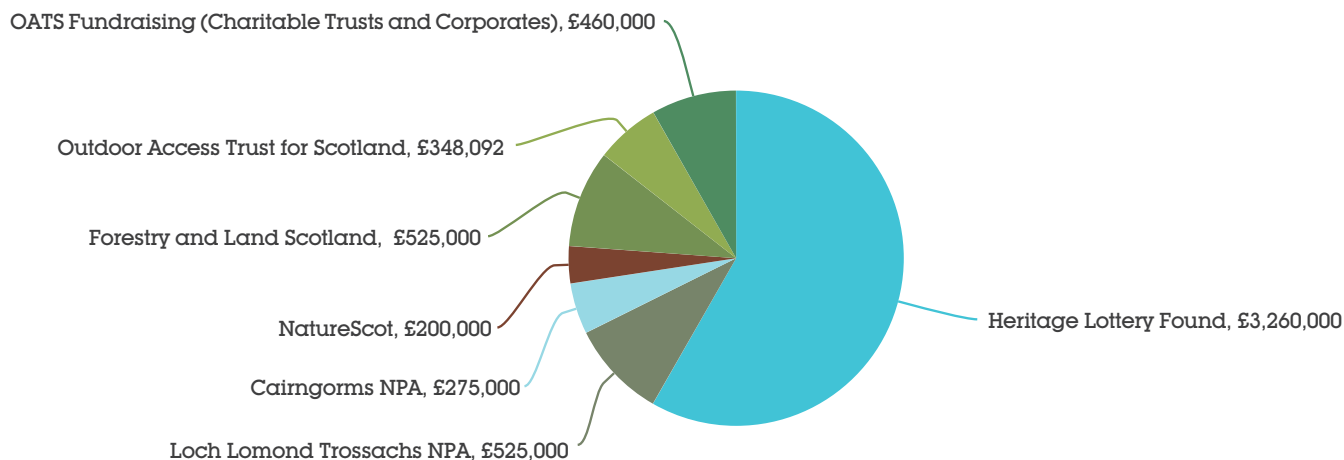
Many thanks to our supporters

Thank you to all who support our work. OATS would be unable to carry out the level or standard of work it does without financial support from a wide range of organisations: public bodies, NGOs, private companies and private individuals.

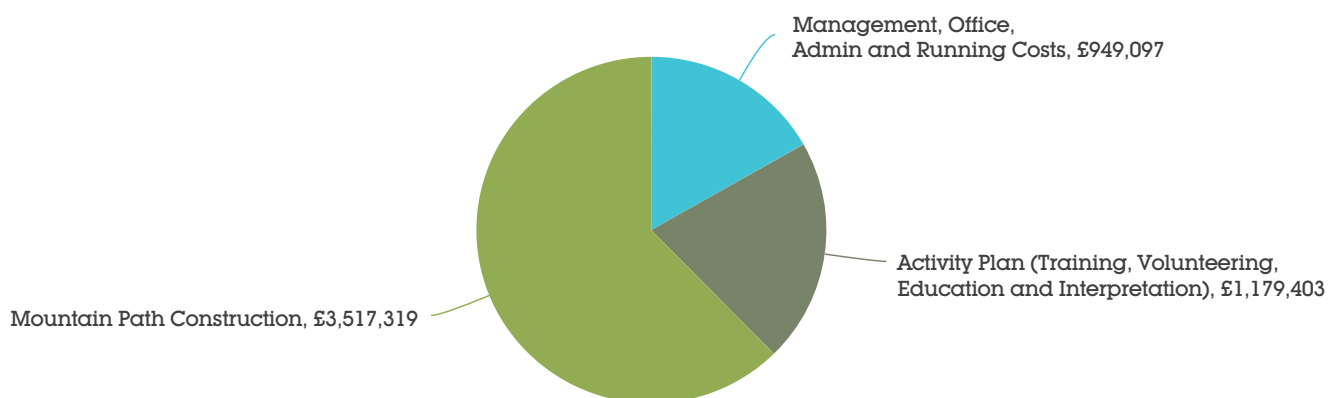


OATS by numbers...

The Mountains and The People income 2015 - 2020



The Mountains and The People expenditure 2015 - 2020



Skye Projects Summary

On Skye OATS has had a total of £1.86m worth of projects on the books since 2018. OATS has contributed £256,000 and raised £240,000 from car-parking.

	Fairy Pools Car Park	Fairy Pools Toilets	SISP Devpt	FPS Further Devpt	NCHF	Totals
OATS	£28,009	£99,862	£10,408	£16,665	£101,140	£256,084
Scottish Govt (RTIF)		£341,140				£341,140
LEADER	£200,000					£200,000
SGRPID			£3,300		£150,00	£153,300
MCHA	£4,889		£2,000		£20,000	£26,889
HIE	£50,00			£10,198		£60,198
THC	£100,000		£1,700		£10,000	£111,700
NCHF					£656,943	£656,943
TOTALS	£382,898	£441,002	£17,408	£26,863	£281,140	£1,806,254

TOTAL Projects Raised on Skye to date

£1,806,254

Total OATS Contribution to Date (A)

£256,084

Total Car Park Surplus April 2018 to March 21 (B)

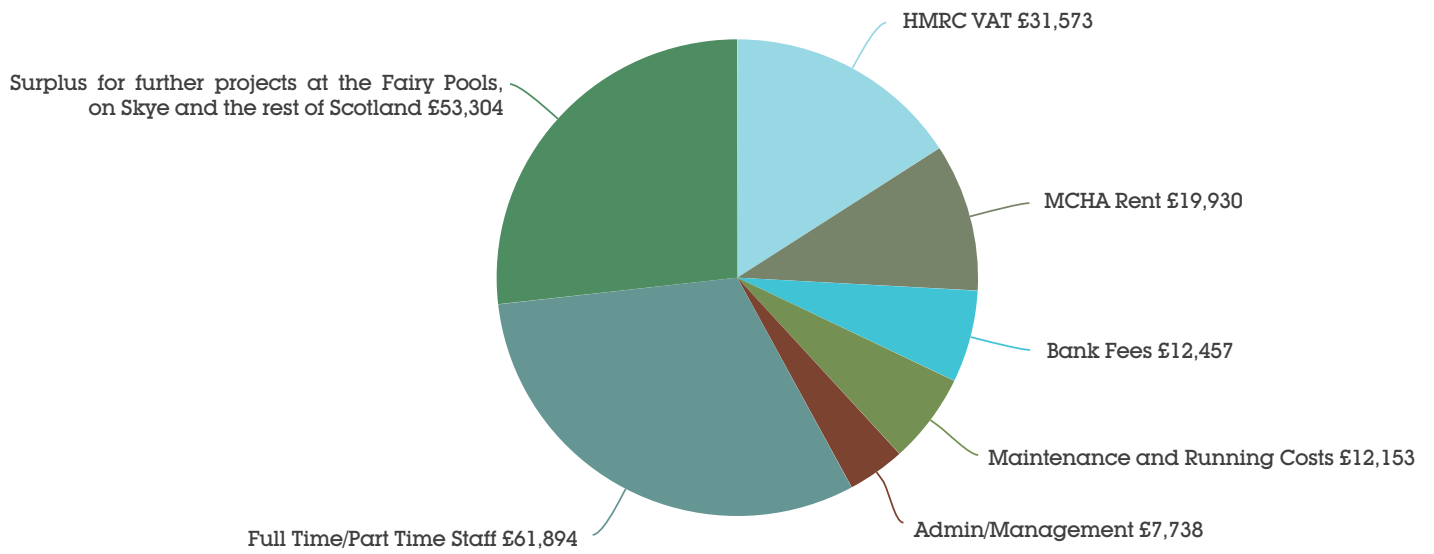
£204,175

Net Surplus/Deficit (B - A)

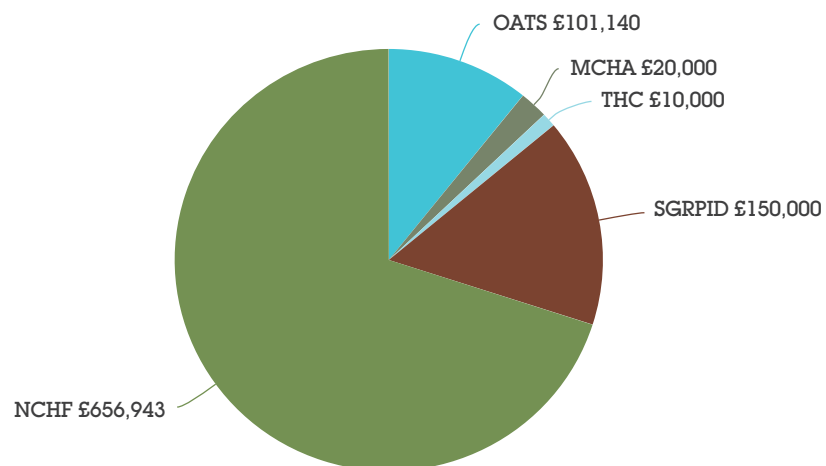
-£51,909

Fairy Pools Car Park and Toilets 2020 - 21

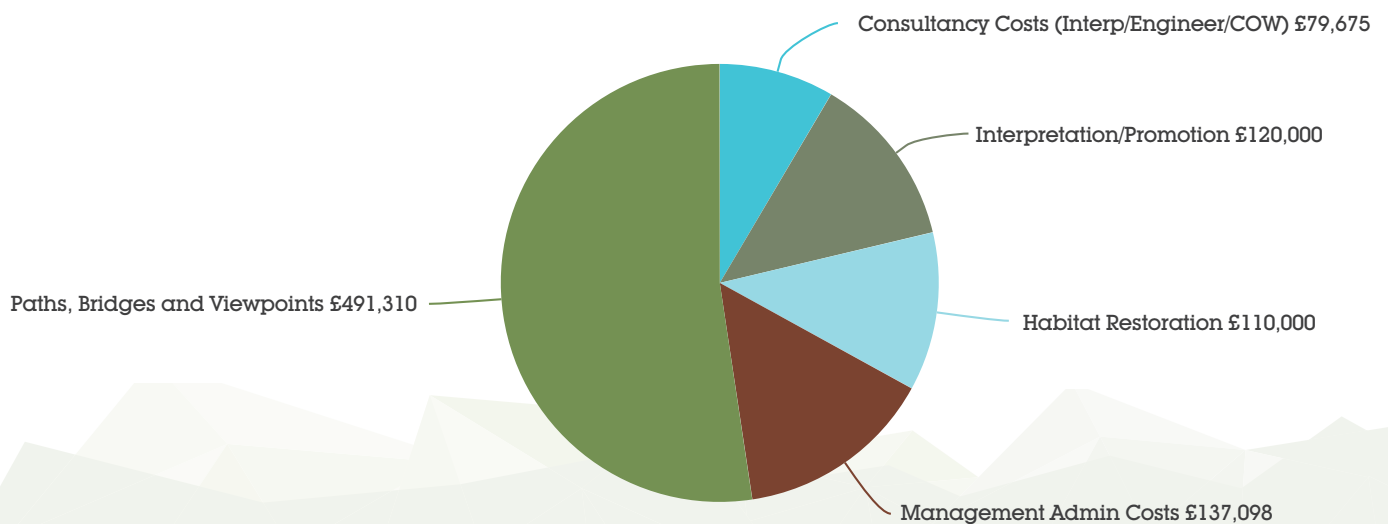
Income £199,050 | Expenditure £145,746



Skye Iconic Sites Project Income



Skye Iconic Sites Project expenditure





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