

Welcomes and farewells from our new chair

**Duncan Bryden** 

There has been plenty of change at OATS in the past year, not least among the staff, and my first duty here is to welcome our new people.

At the Fairy Pools car park and toilets, Skye local Ali Campbell stepped in as facility manager in August at the height of the summer season, tackling the job of managing staff and visitors on this key site. Special thanks to facility supervisor Tony Wilkinson, who stepped up while recruitment was under way.

At our new office at Fountain Mews in Bridge of Allan, Naomi Mizon is the new Trust administrator, providing direct support to the chief executive and myself.

Earlier this year Aviemore resident Shona Irvine was appointed as our Activity Projects Manager. She has been busy leading on volunteering and maintenance in the Cairngorms, and throughout Scotland, and has already run at least 25 maintenance volunteer days.

My appointment as chair of the OATS board is of course another big change. I have been on the OATS board for seven years, having previously been chair of Cairngorms National Park Authority, and now work as a consultant and lecturer in rural development and sustainability.

Ian Moffet will be a hard act to follow, and I must thank him for his service to the organisation over the years.

Other departures from the board include Aberdeenshire Councillor Charles Buchan – Councillor Iris Walker steps in to



his role – and David Cameron from Cairngorms National Park Authority. Thanks to both Charles and David for their sterling service to the Trust.

We still of course have chief executive Dougie Baird at the helm., and long-serving team member Murray Swapp, so continuity is assured.

Their work was instrumental in the crowning achievement of the year. Wins for The Mountains and The People and the Fairy Pools Car Park and Toilets projects in the Scottish Land and Estates Helping it Happen awards are a tribute to all involved.

It demonstrated to everyone, but to landowners especially, the vital role that OATS can play in environmental protection and visitor management.

## The Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland (OATS) is a ground-breaking environmental charity. This is what we do:

#### **ACCESS**

OATS promotes sustainable access – developing, building and fixing upland and lowland paths, path networks, habitats and trailhead facilities, in popular, remote, and fragile places. We do this to support outdoors enthusiasts, land managers and local communities, and promote the health and wellbeing benefits of path use.



#### WORKFORCE

As a Scottish Qualification Authority Approved Centre, OATS drives employment in building and developing path networks, training people in the skills they need for outdoor access and conservation work.



#### **VOLUNTEERS**

OATS gives volunteers the chance to give something back to the places they love, promoting understanding and conservation of heritage and environment.



#### **WORKING WITH PARTNERS**

OATS is at the forefront of developing partnerships to finance conservation projects, collaborating with others to make Scotland's outdoor access network fit for the future, and bringing people together to learn how to make places that matter better for all.

# Small but highly effective charity is the big winner

The OATS team were delighted when they were announced as big winners in a prestigious award scheme for rural businesses, with both The Mountains and the People and the Fairy Pools car park and toilets projects coming out on top.

The wins in this year's Helping it Happen Awards, given by landowners' organisation Scottish Land and Estates, are recognition of the hard work and dedication of OATS staff in solving problems caused by growing visitor numbers.

The Fairy Pools car park and off-grid toilets development on Skye, where OATS provided a unique solution to a local problem created by the global phenomenon of social media-driven tourism, won the Tourism and Visitor Management Award, sponsored by GLM.

The Mountains and The People, the largest and most complex upland path project ever undertaken in the UK covering 120km of paths in





two national parks, won the Enhancing our Environment Through Land Management Award, sponsored by NatureScot.

The focus of the Helping it Happen Awards is on recognising those who enable and support success in rural communities, rural businesses and rural landscapes, with nine categories open for entries.

Marking the double win, OATS chair Duncan Bryden said: "We are delighted that two of our most recent collaborative projects, and all those who have been essential to their success, have been recognised by Scottish Land and Estates.

"We thank them and the judges for the awards and hope they will help raise the OATS profile amongst landowners, managers and communities across Scotland and show that we are a small but highly effective charity capable of delivering and operating innovative solutions to access challenges."

The winners were announced at the first in-person ceremony since 2019 at The Sheraton Grand Hotel and Spa, Edinburgh. Duncan Bryden represented the charity at the ceremony.

### **Breaking News**

## £100,000 funding award for trailblazing OATS project

OATS is to receive the unique Diamond Grant of £100,000 from the Scottish Mountaineering Trust (SMT) to kick-start its ground-breaking An Teallach path-building project, being run in partnership with Mountaineering Scotland (MS).

The SMT announced it would make the award at this year's Dundee Mountain Film Festival.

The three-year An Teallach partnership project is the sole recipient of the award, which marks SMT's 60th anniversary and was offered to a project designed to help more people experience and enjoy the mountains, with a legacy providing enduring benefits to the mountaineering community.

With the An Teallach project OATS and MS – the national representative body for hill walkers, climbers and ski-

tourers in Scotland – are developing a sustainable longterm funding model that aims to change perceptions.

It will ensure path repair and habitat restoration is recognised for its social, economic and environmental benefits, and will encourage mountain users to help fund projects that guarantee Scotland's outdoor access network remains fit for the future.

The Diamond Fund Grant will pay for the work to start, but a further £200,000 will be needed – and much of this will come from appeals to hill users and outdoor enthusiasts.

OATS chief executive Dougie Baird said: "This is great news and will make a real difference to this project. It's

appropriate that the cash has come from a mountaineering charity as it's the mountaineering community which will have to bear the burden of paying for this very necessary scheme."



### Path projects news

#### John O' Groats Trail

With the Association of Northern Trails Scotland (ANTS), OATS is taking a lead role in a ground-breaking project to establish the John O'Groats Trail as an important addition to Scotland's network of long-distance paths.

The stunning 147-mile coastal walking route from Inverness to John O' Groats is a work in progress. It includes some remote, pathless and challenging terrain, while other sections are already popular walks.

Plans and fundraising are already under way, with an Improving Access Grant (IPA) secured to build a 2km stretch of the trail along the cliff edge from Noss Head, near Wick, to Castle Sinclair Grinigoe. Work on this section is already out to tender.



A path condition survey of the whole trail (14 separate sections) has been completed, with a report due to be published. Using this, the joint ANTS/OATS team will look at options and priorities for a long-term work programme.

Parts of the project would be suitable for a substantial Heritage Lottery Fund bid. Money could also be available from local offshore renewables and nuclear decommissioning funds.



#### An Teallach mountain path

OATS is teaming up with Mountaineering Scotland to develop an exciting new path and parking project on An Teallach. The double-Munro ridge is within the Wester Ross Biosphere Reserve, above Dundonell, south of Ullapool in the North-West Highlands.

This iconic mountain's badly eroded paths lie on private land, not in a national park, NGO-owned estate or other protected site, so fundraising for this scheme is more challenging. The solution will be to appeal to mountain users, people who really care about conservation and access in the Scottish countryside, for financial support.

#### Old Man of Storr path work

The Highland Council's path renovation works project at the Old Man of Storr, managed by the Highland Council's Property Team working alongside OATS, is going well.

The second section of path, onto Photographers Knoll, is nearing completion, with the quality of contractor work very high. Next steps include gravel surfacing of the path line. Once done the final approach section to the Photographers Knoll can be completed.

The Storr path renovation project is funded by the Rural Tourism and Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) and Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (SGRPID).



### Trailhead infrastructure news



A Community Asset Transfer between OATS and Highland Council gave us a £1- $\alpha$ -year lease for 25 years on the current car-park site. The lease for the remainder of the site with the private landowner is being finalised.

OATS has just been awarded £440,859, towards an estimated £645,859 cost, from the Scottish Government's Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF). This will enable works to start this year. The Trust has also received a £35,000 grant from Highland Coastal Communities Fund.

## Stac Pollaidh car park and off-grid toilets

With an estimated 50,000 walkers visiting Stac Pollaidh every year and a single-track access road to a car park with just 20 spaces and no toilet facilities, the local community is facing issues very similar to those at the Fairy Pools in Skye before OATS built the car park and toilets.

For the Fairy Pools car park and toilets we developed the highly effective model of a long-term site lease to benefit the local community and surrounding environment. The same model is being adapted to create trailhead infrastructure for Stac Pollaidh.



The first phase will see the car park extended from 20 to 80 spaces; phase two will be building an off-grid toilet block. Income from the car park will provide seed capital for OATS' projects and cash for essential work to protect Stac Pollaidh's paths and habitats.



#### Beinn a'Ghlo Car Park

Planning permission has now been granted for the 60-space car park for walkers at Beinn  $\alpha'$  Ghlo in Perthshire, which will provide funds for the aftercare of the new paths developed there through the Mountains and The People project. CNPA has made a grant of up to £145k towards the project.

An appointment for the construction works for this project will be made shortly and it's hoped the build will start in the coming months.

#### Fairy Pools car park maintenance and improvements

With financial assistance from HIE's Community-Led Tourism Infrastructure Fund via the Minginish Community Hall Association, a link path between the car park's top and bottom tiers has been built and the car-park drainage has been improved. An extra ticket machine installed this year has eased queuing at the busiest times over the summer.

Tarmacing the two tiers of the car park is the major work planned on the site for the autumn and winter months, with ground works for this about to get under way. The addition of painting to outline parking spaces, in the tried-and-tested herringbone pattern, will help users and reduce the need for casual staff on site at busy times.

## Adapt and develop: a model for the future

#### Path users have to pay up says CEO Dougie Baird

THE future of OATS depends on finding new ways ahead – not just new paths and projects, but new ways of doing things, and to adapt to the shifting political, social and financial landscape we work in.

At the same time we must be bold in applying solutions that we know work to new areas and problems.



The Mountains and The People project marked the likely high point of one way of building and funding paths – looking to an extensive public sector partnership to match-fund Lottery money.

But half of Scotland's major mountains are outwith parks and NGO estates, and we need to forge ways of financing and promoting path-building in these places.

An Teallach, south of Ullapool, is high on the hit list of most mountaineers in the Highlands but it is entirely in private hands, and the only reason people go there and use the path is to climb the Munros and traverse the ridge.

The access path and even some of the highest parts of the main route have become badly eroded, and are in urgent need of maintenance. Much of the money for this must come from those who use it.

With many walkers and climbers driving to the hills in expensive cars and turning out with thousands of pounds worth of equipment, there is little doubt many can afford to contribute. But they may be simply unaware of the cost of path building and the lack of funds for it.

We are applying for cash from the Scottish Mountaineering Trust's Diamond Grant, but we will need path users to cough up a further £100,000 a year over two years to get this project completed.

As a result, our plan is that Mountaineering Scotland and the British Mountaineering Council will appeal to their members to find cash for the An Teallach path. It's quite simple: if they don't, this

mighty mountain will suffer the consequences.



By showing this approach to path funding can work, we hope to use the same methods elsewhere and develop a rolling programme of path repairs for all Scotland's mountains and hills in private hands.

We have already shown that the Fairy Pools car-parking model, with receipts funding path building at this site and others, works well.

It is now being copied at Beinn a Ghlo in Perthshire and Stac Pollaidh in Coigach, with the start of building works rapidly approaching. We have also drawn up a list of more sites elsewhere, with the potential for such schemes, as far afield as the North Highlands, Argyll and Southern Uplands.

Demonstrating that a model works makes it more attractive as a solution to landowners and communities, and the car-parking model itself is adaptable for different places and partners. Our solution to An Teallach and other mountain paths will be the same.



With Covid, lockdowns and travel restrictions driving a new generation of outdoor users into the countryside, there is no doubt that pressure will continue on paths and trailheads.

By creative forward thinking and playing to our strengths, we will make sure OATS' expertise and experience can be part of creating and maintaining that infrastructure, to the benefit of path users and the environment.

# Opportunities and ideas – how OATS can set the pace

## New chair Duncan Bryden reviews the opportunities facing the charity

ONE of the major hurdles faced by any path project can be persuading private landowners and estates of the benefits of path work. The current funding model appears to favour non-private land managers and owners who have a joint public access and conservation remit, and advantages in securing grant funding.

As our chief executive discusses on the facing page, this is becoming more important for OATS where we are working in areas beyond national parks and NGO-owned estates.

Longer-term, coming land reform legislation is looking to address public interest in how land is used. Path work is a clear way that the wider wellbeing and benefits arising from land could be increased and will provide an opportunity for landowners to demonstrate and contribute to an enhanced public interest.

It's likely, too, that future land-based subsidies may be connected to good environmental stewardship and public interest tests, incentivising landowners further to consider investment and partnership in measures like path works, habitat regeneration and even trailhead facilities.

Forward-thinking landowners are already considering or implementing these measures. They have a long-term vision of sustainable stewardship, and the responsibility of ownership includes enabling appropriate access. Measures like path networks that welcome and invite can often make management for visitors safe and less burdensome than ad hoc or prohibitive measures.

OATS has already been approached by one major private owner, with a view to repairing, at their expense, paths to an iconic Munro on their ground. This approach fits with their long-term philosophy for the land in this location.

"You can't manage what you can't measure" is an oftquoted maxim. Another opportunity to sharpen the OATS offer arises with developments in data gathering, in particular using sensors linked to LoRaWAN (Low Range Wide Area Network) and cellular networks.

Technology now enables cost-effective sensors in remote off-grid locations to feed data on path use and weather in real time to office-based gatherers. This data could give OATS three different benefits.

Seeing how much use paths, car parks and toilets are getting without manual data collection and on-site counts can be of huge benefit. Data

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Duncan Bryden

gives an edge when applying for funding, managing path and facility works and evidencing successful outcomes.

Such data can also feed into a public app on a smart phone, allowing people to choose when to visit and spreading the visitor load at peak periods. This is already being done at popular beaches in East Lothian and could be a huge help at the Fairy Pools car-park and access road in Skye. Apps can be expanded to deliver interpretation, or even collect user-generated content – a geo-located picture of a path problem such as a flood-damaged bridge, for example.

Access is fundamentally about people. Data adds substance to the OATS view that more people and more diverse users are coming to the outdoors through the path networks we support. Many are not traditional path users and are, perhaps, new to hill-walking or visiting natural sites.

With this wider demographic comes a demand for different experiences and facilities – dog showers and midge nets anyone? More people are seeking "softer" adventures, such as safe but natural paths to interesting places – not wading across untracked peat and scree. Path networks with a choice of welcoming options are key drivers in attracting visitors and keeping them longer in rural communities.

Emerging from the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, domestic tourism and day trips into nature seem likely to grow. We must be ready to meet this demand and avoid repeating the "over tourism" pressures seen in 2020/21 at popular sites. This of course needs both investment and skills.

It's another chance for OATS to step up and be ready to offer its expertise in path-building, trail-head management and fundraising. With Active Travel an increasing priority for Transport Scotland, there could be crossover funding there to help support our work.

In the seven years since I have been on the board of OATS it has shown itself to be nimble, adaptable, and effective. That should stand the organisation in good stead as we look to tackle likely demands and grasp these opportunities.

### Murray Swapp: A good fit for the job

On his first site visit for the organisation, OATS staffer Murray Swapp was walking around Loch Kinord, in the beautiful Muir of Dinnet National Nature Reserve in Aberdeenshire, in warm sunshine.

"Wow, what a great job," he said to himself.

That opinion doesn't seem to have changed much in the sixteen years since: the job has remained enjoyable enough to keep him interested, and he's now the longest-serving member of staff at OATS.

His current task, overseeing the extensive Skye Iconic Sites Project (SISP) of path, bridge, habitat restoration and interpretation work is the biggest he has undertaken for the organisation. He says: "With all the challenges this has presented I will probably look back at this as the most interesting job I have done for OATS, certainly to date."

To become the right person for that task has not been a straightforward journey – as he says, "There was no university degree in path work" – but the skills he has learned along the way have stood him in good stead.

After school he joined the Scottish School of Forestry at Inverness College, now part of the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Ten years working in forestry and the agricultural sectors assured him working in the countryside was what he wanted to do, and gave him a taste of project management, including working as a Community Forester for Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Nepal.

After returning to the UK he enrolled for a degree in Countryside and Environmental Management at the University of Aberdeen, and subsequently joined what was then the Upper Deeside Access



Trust, working on paths in the Dee catchment as part of the East Cairngorms Access Project (ECAP).

That changed in 2008 when the organisation became COAT, the Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust, with a wider brief and closer links to the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA). Murray worked alongside community groups, CNPA, Aberdeenshire Council and other partners, negotiating with landowners and others to ensure projects were delivered.

Jobs Murray tackled included upgrading and constructing new core paths and strategic routes such as the Tarland Way, the Dava Way and the Speyside Way's 15-mile extension from Aviemore to Kingussie. "There were challenges right through the project," says Murray. They included working with Network Rail as the main line



runs through the Spey Valley, often close to the trail line.

The organisation became OATS in 2017, after taking on The Mountains and The People Project (TMTP) covering both the CNPA and the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Parks, and other work further afield in Scotland.



At this time Murray's work continued on the Speyside Way extension, but also spread out, as he took on the Access Projects Manager role for TMTP upland path work, supporting the Technical Projects Officer. He was also working for the Association of Northern Trails Scotland (ANTS) on the John O' Groats Trail.

All that experience has helped when it comes to SISP – negotiating with landowners and other interested parties, managing contractors, working with partners and funders, and a grasp of the practicalities of path building are all skills Murray now brings to the table. That has helped the project become something of a template for dealing with tourist honey-pot sites.

Murray believes such work will grow: the recent surge in popularity of outdoor sites and activities seeing no sign of falling, and his experience is likely to be invaluable.

Days such as those at Loch Kinord are not so frequent now, with plenty of time in meetings and in front of a computer screen, but getting on site still brings its rewards for Murray.

"When you have gone through the planning and negotiations and seen the work through, to see the path in place and people enjoying it, that aspect of getting to the end of a project is really satisfying," he says.

# Access Projects Manager Murray Swapp reports on the Skye Iconic Sites Project

The Skye Iconic Sites Project (SISP) continues to evolve and progress towards its goals of restoring paths and the environment, and providing interpretation and information, with important developments in recent months.

Currently the biggest project OATS has, SISP teams are working at Old Man of Storr, the Quiraing and the Fairy Pools, all impacted by a huge increase in visitors in recent years. Begun in April 2021, the project is expected to be completed in June next year.

The project, managed overall by OATS with funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), has been greatly supported by the Skye Iconic Sites Partnership members based on Skye, some providing funds and others putting in volunteering time.

#### Interpretation update

Steady progress is being made towards finalising the information panels, with a target of next April for completion and installation, and some materials for construction already ordered.

Planning permission has now been granted for the panels, and final tweaks are being made to the material, with the third draft of the designs going out to SISP partners for comment.

#### Habitat restoration progress

At the Old Man of Storr, small turfs are being laid under around 1,500 sq m of hessian netting on areas once covered with vegetation and now badly damaged by footfall. Within two years the netting should have faded into the background, degrading and disappearing completely in about four years, leaving healthy vegetation to protect the soil. The success of the work will be monitored by NatureScot.

On the same site 1.3 kilometres of habitat restoration fencing has been installed to control grazing, boosting habitat restoration work and giving species-rich grassland a better chance of survival.

Large-scale returfing has been successful on the area around the Quiraing, using turf from a local quarry with permission of the local Grazing Committee. Despite signs asking people to stay off these areas, visitors have persisted in stepping onto them for photos. To prevent further damage, it is proposed to install low posts and ropes, which proved effective in a trial. A similar approach is proposed at the Old Man of Storr on damaged areas across to the rise known as the "Photographers' Knoll".

#### Path-building and renovation

The focus of the project is to make the paths more accessible to more people, providing easier access for the young, elderly and disabled, as well as protecting the environment.

At the end of last year, 300 metres of new and upgraded paths, two metres wide, were constructed at the Quiraing. Two new viewpoints, and 50 metres of all-abilities path to one of them, were also created.

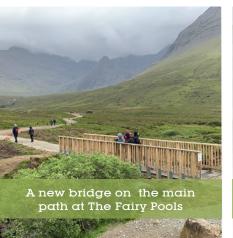
Two new bridges have been installed on the path to the Fairy Pools, so visitors can avoid using stepping stones and eroding burn banks, alongside the development of a better path surface and the replacement of cross-drains with plastic culverts and new paths to viewpoints, aiming for completion next year.

#### Finance matters

SISP is set to hit financial targets comfortably, working within a total budget of just under £1 million. Around £650,000 came from The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) administered via the Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund (NCHF), with £102k from OATS, £150k from Scottish Government Rural Payments Inspections Division (SGRPID), £20k from Minginish Community Hall Association, and £10k from Highland Council.

#### Data plan for visitor management

Through SISP OATs has bought and is installing two people counters and a vehicle sensor to contribute to an Edinburgh University study intended to develop a visitor management system for Skye based on real-time data to help visitors choose where to go at busy times.







# Work done willingly and well: OATS volunteers get into action

Shona Irvine, OATS' new activity projects Manager, started work in early January 2022 with a remit of managing the maintenance volunteering programme, the Adopt A Path scheme (AAP), and projects in the Cairngorms National Park. She didn't waste time in getting stuck in.

Volunteers on Bynack Mor

volunteering had seen a two-year hiatus because of Covid-19.

There were initial issues with reengaging volunteers for both projects, but the year has seen increased engagement and a gradual rise in new outdoor enthusiasts keen to get involved. User improvements to the AAP website, which gives key information about the scheme and allows Volunteer Adopters to report path issues, and setting up a Facebook group for all OATS volunteers to build a closer community, were essential here.



Shona Irvine

In March Shona ran two successful refresher days for current Volunteer Adopters, running through the AAP survey system and how to use the website and report path problems. In April she arranged training for new Adopters, talking them through the AAP process, and practising the survey method on a hill walk.

Initially she spent time connecting and meeting with partner organisations on these projects. These included the national parks, Cairngorm Mountain, Rothiemurchus estate, and the RSPB.



A key task early in the year was reconnecting with the maintenance volunteers and those involved in the AAP scheme, and updating the databases. It wasn't without its challenges. AAP, which enables those passionate about the mountains to become custodians of upland paths, had been in hibernation since the end of The Mountains and The People project, and maintenance



While the OATS maintenance volunteer programme has a strong focus on the Cairngorms National Park, Shona is exploring other opportunities throughout Scotland where volunteer programmes can be developed. This includes Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park and other OATS path and habitat restoration projects.

More than 40 maintenance volunteers have taken part in at least one of the 30 volunteer days organised by Shona since March, with a core group of 15 to 20 attending regularly.

The majority of volunteer days have been within the Cairngorms National Park, with a lot of work around the northern Cairngorms and in the Braemar/Ballater area, as well as in Glen Clova. Beinn a' Ghlo, where OATS is working on a much-needed car park development, has also seen maintenance work carried out on its paths.

After increased footfall on many paths in recent years there has been lots to catch up on. The days have predominantly focused on path drainage – clearing out cross-drains and water-bars. The paths have definitely needed it and the volunteers have found it really satisfying.

Since she started work, Shona has developed processes to make the days out as fun and relaxed as possible and also to enable the less experienced to get the best out of their day and feel part of the group. Newcomers start by being paired up with a regular so they can learn the techniques. Shona's home baking, which gives the team a mid-afternoon boost, is fast becoming an essential part of an OATS volunteer's day.

As we head into autumn, Shona organised a maintenance volunteer weekend at The Old Man of Storr on Skye. It supported the habitat restoration work that is part of OATS Skye Iconic Sites Project, in conjunction with a number of like-minded community groups on the island who are keen volunteers.

Knowing how important it is to keep volunteers engaged, Shona is also looking at dates for work on a few low-level paths, including the Speyside Way, over the winter months.

### Many thanks to our supporters



































**Eòrpa agus Alba**Maoin Leasachaidh Roinnean na h-Eòrpa
A' tasgadh ann an Àm ri teachd Gleusta, Seasmhach is In-ghabhail



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Front Cover Photo:

Murray Swapp with Dougie Vipond at The Fairy Pools, Skye, for BBC Landward - @ BBC