



OUTDOOR
ACCESS
TRUST FOR
SCOTLAND



PATH MAINTENANCE VOLUNTEERS
EVA KUPSKA AND ALAN DOBIE
WORKING ON AN TEALLACH AS PART
OF THE IT'S UP TO US CAMPAIGN

2023

IT'S UP TO US
PROTECTING SKYE ICONIC SITES
THE VOLUNTEER BRIGADE
BEINN A' GHLO CAR PARK OPENS
FAIRY POOLS MAGIC
WHAT'S NEXT FOR OATS

IMPACT REVIEW

FOREWORD BY OATS CEO AND CHAIR

WELCOME

THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW THE OATS TEAM HAS MANAGED THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE LAST 12 MONTHS AND DELIVERED GREAT OUTDOOR ACCESS PROJECTS



DOUGIE BAIRD, OATS CEO

Welcome to the OATS Annual Review 2022–23. This past year has been another jam-packed one for OATS, fulfilling our ambitions for safe, well-constructed access provision people can enjoy, while safeguarding nature and community amenity.

We're very proud of the work across Scotland by the small OATS team to help communities and visitors.



DUNCAN BRYDEN, OATS CHAIR

We would like to thank them and the OATS volunteers, community activists, and funding and contracting partners, for their enthusiasm, experience and perseverance. Delivering quality projects is possible only when we come together — when people with diverse skills combine forces and take responsibility to solve access challenges for the wider good.

As a small charity emerging from the pandemic and then facing the crosswinds of rising prices, a squeeze on public sector budgets, and inflation, OATS has sought to act in several ways including:

- Securing more unrestricted income to cover core operating costs as a buffer against future uncertainty over public funding for projects

- Controlling costs with a lean staffing complement and hybrid working practices
- Investing in raising the profile of OATS and showcasing our work
- Greater partnership working to expand capacities

We believe that OATS is “punching above its weight” in terms of delivering a positive impact for visitors and communities. Our pioneering access models and projects outlined in this review show how OATS has stepped into challenging environments as a force for good. Visitors, and crucially, host communities benefit from managed sites which now generate local employment and income alongside amenity improvements and memorable experiences.

In preparing a new five-year business plan in 2024 OATS looks forward in hope because we are seeing a renewed interest and support for outdoor access. More people are appreciating the scenic and health-giving appeal of our uplands and coast and the benefits of good, well-maintained access networks and facilities like toilets. OATS has first-hand experience of what's possible when a motivated community of problem-solvers comes together. We hope you enjoy reading about some of what OATS has achieved this year through our Scotland-wide projects.

1. JOHN O'GROATS TRAIL

Audit of 147 mile coastal path

2. STAC POLLALDH

Trailhead car park and off grid toilets — start 2024

3. AN TEALLACH / IT'S UP TO US

Path renovation, p5

4. THE QUIRAING

Path and conservation project, p6

5. THE OLD MAN OF STORR

Path and conservation project, p6

6. THE FAIRY POOLS

Path, bridge and conservation project, p6
177 space car park and off-grid toilets, p12

7. SPEYSIDE WAY

Path gradient levelling-out project

8. CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK

Path maintenance volunteer programme, p8

9. DINNET

40 space trailhead car park

10. DEESIDE WAY

Path gradient levelling-out project

11. BEINN A' GHLO

60 space trailhead car park, p10

12. INVERCAULD

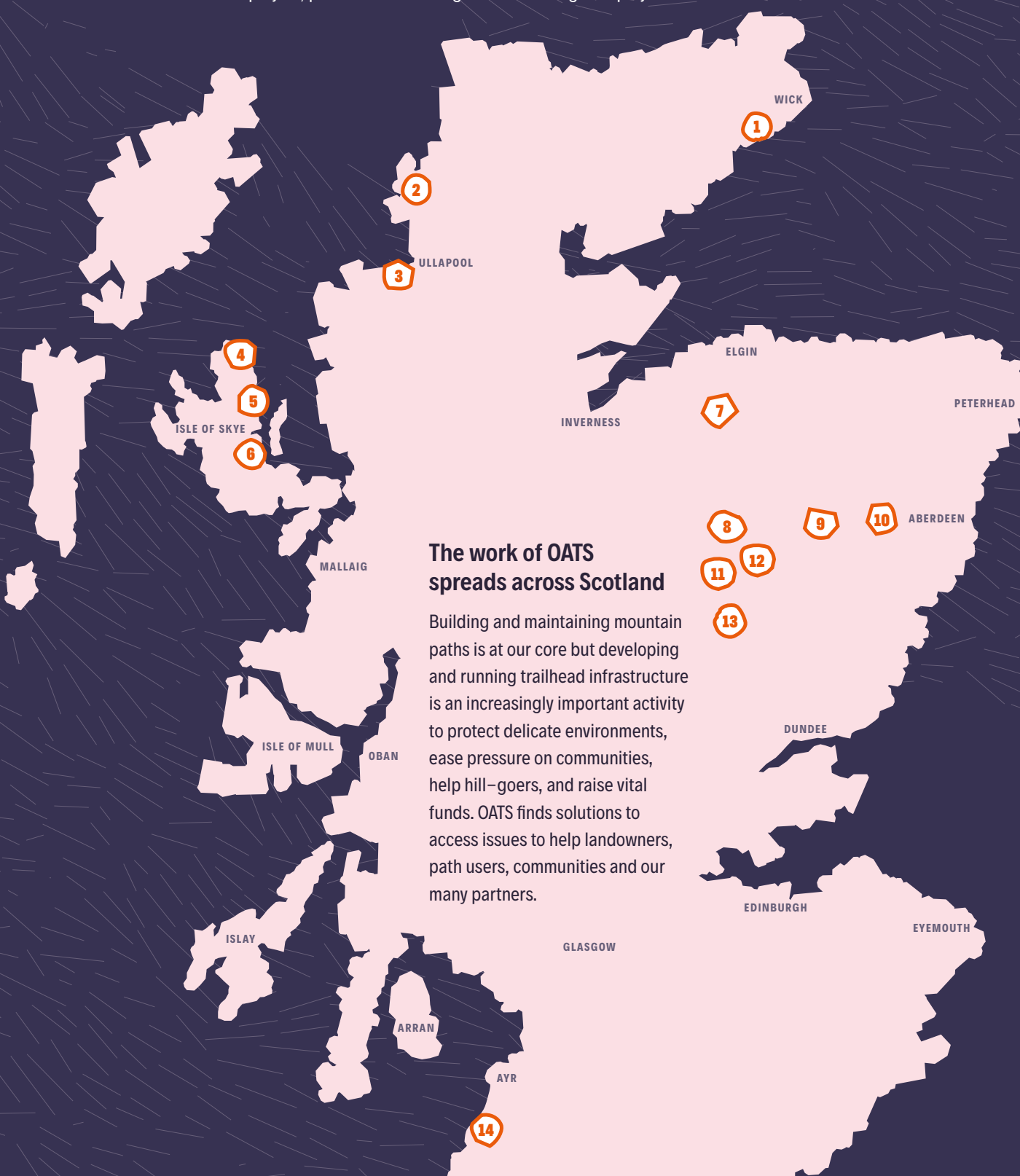
Path redesign

13. BEN VRACKIE

Path design and management

14. SOUTH AYRSHIRE

Core path network survey



The work of OATS spreads across Scotland

Building and maintaining mountain paths is at our core but developing and running trailhead infrastructure is an increasingly important activity to protect delicate environments, ease pressure on communities, help hill-goers, and raise vital funds. OATS finds solutions to access issues to help landowners, path users, communities and our many partners.

FUNDING THE FUTURE IT'S UP TO US



The launch of the It's Up To Us campaign in May was hugely significant for OATS and its work for years to come.

OATS is delighted to team up with Mountaineering Scotland, the representative body of climbers and hill-walkers, to seek new ways of raising the money needed to repair our mountain paths.

It's Up To Us (IUTU) is asking ordinary hill-goers to foot at least part of the bill, but it is also looking for new ways to raise funding, and OATS and Mountaineering Scotland will try to persuade the Scottish Government regular doses of taxpayers' money are needed to maintain the network.

The health and wellbeing benefits of hillwalking are fairly obvious, and hillwalking tourism is worth £1.6bn a year to the Scottish economy — with between 10 million and 20 million trips a year being taken.

But all those visitor boots crush vegetation and break up paths, letting water in and erosion take hold. Paths become wide ugly scars, and the landscapes we love are diminished.

A rough estimate says repairing all Scotland's damaged mountain paths would cost around £30m, so the argument for funding — in return for what paths do for the economy — looks obvious.

When raising money for paths in national parks, such as in our The Mountains and

The People project between 2015 and 2020, we have a partner to help straight away in the shape of park authorities. Charity-owned estates such as Glen Coe have their own funds and teams to fix paths.

Much of that work has been done, but it's on private estates outside the parks that the going gets tougher. Here landowners have little incentive to fix paths or even engage with Mountaineering Scotland and OATS: there is no return on any investment, or Government grant scheme.

IUTU has already started work on its first project, over 3km of the main path up the privately-owned An Teallach in Wester Ross, which will cost around £300,000 (see opposite).

The first year's work is paid for by the Scottish Mountaineering Trust's Diamond Grant of £100,000, but similar sums will be needed for the following two years — and there are 400km more paths across the path network that need fixing.

Working with Mountaineering Scotland, with thousands of walkers and climbers on its database, and its expert team, will make the job that bit easier.

But the loss of EU funding — which has paid an estimated £7m for mountain

**£151,000
RAISED SO FAR**

£100,000

Scottish Mountaineering
Trust's Diamond Grant

£24,000

walkers and climbers and
mountaineering clubs

£27,000

major donors, charities
and business

paths in recent years — will have a serious impact, and Governments have little spare cash these days.

So it is literally Up To Us, hill users, path volunteers, OATS staff and Mountaineering Scotland experts, to make those arguments for funding, to seek out cash from areas such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, and to keep making the case that mountain paths are an enormous national asset that it's worth paying for.

CONTRACTOR
JULIAN DIGBY
AT WORK ON
AN TEALLACH

OATS SURVEY WORK
ON AN TEALLACH



CONTRACTORS
AT WORK ON
AN TEALLACH

DOUGIE BAIRD, OATS CEO,
ON A PATH MAINTENANCE
VOLUNTEER DAY



AN TEALLACH

It's Up To Us has started work on its first, flagship project, the An Teallach path in Wester Ross, climbing the hillside above Dundonnell at the head of Little Loch Broom.

More than 3km of path needs fixed, so with a six-metre damage zone needing work, that's 18,000 sq m of mess. The mountain is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and the loss of habitat reduces its value.

Contractors directed by OATS are working their way up from the bottom, replacing the old rough, badly braided stalkers' path.

This section, phase one, needs a "full build": a drainage ditch dug, and the spoil sorted and graded, providing much of the new surface.

Materials used for path-building must match local geology – limestone on acid soils for instance, would be disastrous for vegetation – so using stuff from the surrounding hillside is best.

Steep areas need pitching – stone steps and slabs – to resist the rush of water. Other stretches will be packed gravel, with drainage features to keep them dry.

Vegetation from the ditch or path line will be patched into the surrounding worn ground to aid its recovery.

The shorter stretches between bare rock in the middle ground – phase two – will require a similar amount of work. The two will total around 1300 metres of work, and take two years.

The last phase will be 2km or so of higher path across rockier terrain, needing "light touch" work only: more subtle changes, to keep water off the path line, and walkers on it.

Machine building, using diggers, is used on open moorland stretches of path, such as the recent project on Beinn a' Ghlo in Perthshire, but is unlikely to feature on An Teallach, with hand-building needed on the steep ground.

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THE PATH
MAINTENANCE
VOLUNTEER TEAM
WORKING ON AN
TEALLACH AS PART
OF THE IT'S UP TO
US CAMPAIGN



A SKYE-HIGH SUCCESS STORY

THE SKYE ICONIC SITES PROJECT

Consultants assessed the project in a final evaluation report to the main funders, NatureScot's Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund. The report says Skye Iconic Sites Project (SISP) has delivered a massive impact to Skye.

The project upgraded infrastructure at the Fairy Pools, Old Man of Storr and the Quiraing, three island sites subject to almost unbearable visitor pressures over recent years (see opposite).

The island's reputation as an international tourist destination was being hit by lack of basic visitor infrastructure at such destinations.

The report says now visitors on average rate the quality of infrastructure as 8.9 out of 10, meaning it is extremely good.

An even higher rating was given to recommending the sites to family and friends, and high ratings were given to visiting more Skye sites and staying longer as a result of their iconic sites experience.

Just as important has been the impact on local residents

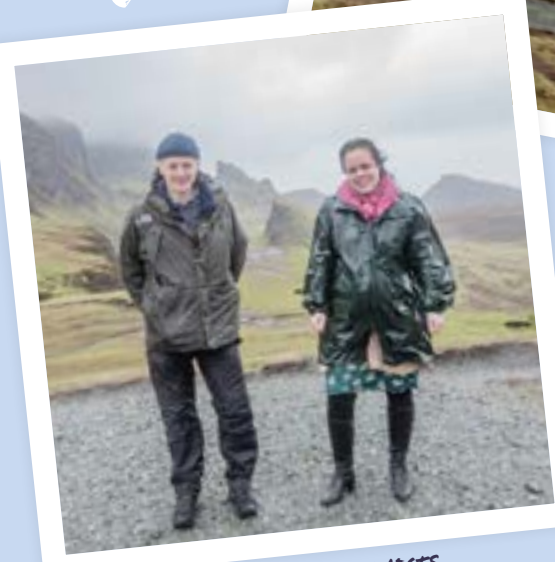
The report says local people on average scored the improvements at the three sites from the SISP work at 8.8 out of 10 – very high. The process used to create interpretation boards capturing the cultural and historical identity of the area with local people was “exemplary.”

And the tourist trade which keeps Skye's economy afloat has been boosted, with the Fairy Pools and the Storr seeing a 31% increase in footfall between 2019 (pre-pandemic) and 2023.

This means a growth in bed-nights and use of local services, boosting jobs not only locally but as far afield as Inverness, where visitors fly in. Similar growth is estimated for the Quiraing.

The SISP partnership has also been working with the Edinburgh University team behind the myskeytime app which lets visitors check how busy the sites are. It's hoped that by diverting them elsewhere it can reduce crowding, particularly at peak times.

The consultants said the “vast range of multi-faceted actions” will continue to deliver benefits to visitors, the environmental and the local economy.



MURRAY SWAPP, OATS ACCESS PROJECTS MANAGER WITH KATE FORBES MSP AT THE OPENING OF THE NEW QUIRAING PATH



RETURNING WORK AT THE QUIRAING





SEEDS WERE VACUUMED UP AT THE OLD MAN OF STORR FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION



RAKING IN THE SPECIES-RICH GRASS SEED AT THE FAIRY POOLS



A HELICOPTER DELIVERS MATERIALS FOR THE FAIRY POOLS PATH TO CONTRACTORS



BURN CROSSING ON THE FAIRY POOLS PATH, BEFORE AND AFTER BRIDGE BUILDING

WHAT WE DID

The OATS-led Skye Iconic Sites Project tackled environmental degradation and the chronic lack of tourist infrastructure, interpretation and promotion at three sites on the Isle of Skye whose popularity has mushroomed.

The Old Man of Storr, the Quiraing and the Fairy Pools were all improved, based on the ideas of a working group of partners concerned about the visitor experience at the sites.

Habitat restoration arrested and helped reverse vegetation degradation at the sites, preparing them for natural regeneration and future-proofing them.

Development and implementation of visitor management and site resilience techniques, based on advice from Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities, was led by the Skye Connect destination management organisation.

HABITAT RESTORATION ARRESTED AND HELPED REVERSE VEGETATION DEGRADATION, PREPARING THEM FOR NATURAL REGENERATION

Work totalling almost £1 million was backed by NatureScot's Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund and was led by OATS, with additional funding provided by OATS (£98,793), the Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (£150,000) Highland Council (£10,000) and Minginish Community Hall Association (£20,000).

Major path construction was carried out at the Fairy Pools and Quiraing, with new bridges at the Fairy Pools, and visitor viewing points in key places.

One aim of the project was to develop infrastructure to help a more diverse range of people access the sites and provide a better visitor experience.

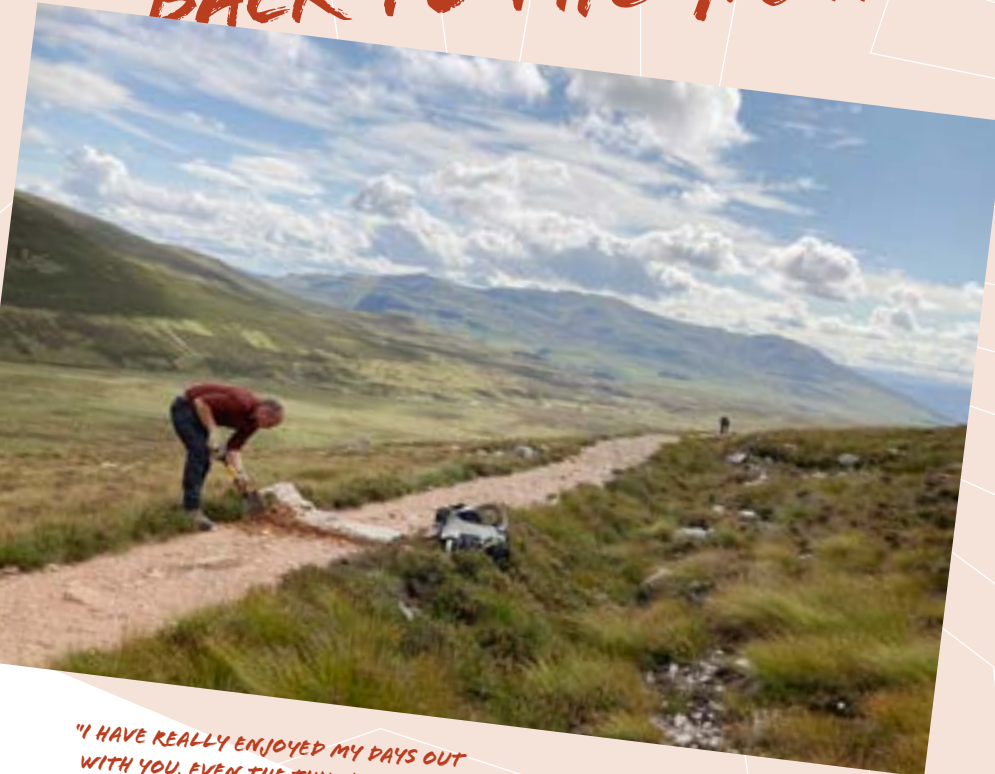
Path improvement at the Old Man of Storr has been completed by Highland Council, with contract management support from OATS, on a separate Rural Tourism Infrastructure Funded initiative.

Themed interpretation was carefully thought out to provide information on both cultural and natural heritage, with care taken to ensure Gaelic is a feature.

The project was managed by Murray Swapp, OATS Access Projects Manager. Murray had worked for OATS since 2006 and brought a wealth of experience to bear to deliver an innovative project with lasting legacy.

PATH MAINTENANCE VOLUNTEERING UPDATE SEPTEMBER 2023

"VOLUNTEERING DAYS ARE FUN,
REWARDING AND YOU GET A SENSE
OF GIVING A LITTLE SOMETHING
BACK TO THE GREAT OUTDOORS"



"I HAVE REALLY ENJOYED MY DAYS OUT
WITH YOU, EVEN THE THUNDERSTORMS
ON BYNACK MORE!"

PATH VOLUNTEER



SHONA IRVINE TOOK CHARGE OF
VOLUNTEERING PROJECTS

The difference in time and money spent on paths across different areas is evident and highlights the need for path work even where the landowner doesn't think it is important — all part of the challenge!

Once the problems on a path have been identified and the landowner contacted, it's down to signing up volunteers. This year I have developed social media channels and now people hear of volunteer dates through Facebook, Twitter (X!) and Instagram, as well as on our website and the Volunteer Cairngorms portal.

We relaunched our upland path volunteering in 2022 and this year, the second season has been another successful one.

There is enthusiasm to get involved from both returning and new volunteers, and the range of new people is growing, particularly with more large employers giving their staff "volunteer days" each year to use.

Familiar faces, combined with folk from a variety of walks of life, have made for good fun groups and conversations.

But it's not all chat: we have had teams out working hard across Cairngorms National Park, from the Angus Glens and Lochnagar to the Cairngorm Plateau.

Land ownership across the Cairngorms is complicated and having (mostly!) figured it out for the hill paths we work on, this year it was nice to get back in touch with various landowners or managers and re-engage and update on path works.

"I LOVE THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINS
AND I AM AT THE STAGE I WANT
TO PUT SOMETHING BACK TO THE
MOUNTAINS I LOVE"

PATH VOLUNTEER

"WE ALL CAUSE EROSION WHEN WE WALK ALONG PATHS AND VOLUNTEERING IS A WAY OF PUTTING THINGS RIGHT"

PATH VOLUNTEER



"A DAY OUT WITH OATS TICKS ALL THE BOXES AND OF COURSE SHONA MANAGES TO ORGANISE PERFECT WEATHER (WELL, MOST OF THE TIME ANYWAY!)"

PATH VOLUNTEER

There have certainly been weather-related challenges this year: the teams have battled cold, wet and windy conditions; over-friendly midgies; and even a few days that were too hot!

Despite this, we have completed the regular drainage runs (essential maintenance on paths to prevent deterioration), worked to rebuild waterbars, blocked off path braids and attacked other problems where we could.

Of particular note was the successful partnership working across the Park, which has seen great progress. This has included working alongside RSPB on Abernethy hill paths, with Forestry and Land Scotland, and in cooperation with other landholders and stakeholders.

This ensures those working on the ground and leading groups are doing so in a similar manner, and from a safety point of view it is useful to have a second set of eyes watching out for the sometimes very strong-minded group!

On occasion we are driven in by the landowner (eg Balmoral and RSPB Abernethy) allowing for more time and energy for working.

Links made with rangers and other staff help everyone to understand the importance of paths and introduce them to our Adopt a Path scheme.

This second volunteer scheme, with adoptees reporting issues, is rolling along nicely. Recent website upgrades will allow reported problems to be categorised more easily and will direct contractor work where is most needed. A professional team will hopefully be working through Autumn 2023 to deal with problems of damage and erosion on the paths which volunteers cannot.

I have also once again worked with a group of asylum seekers and refugees, the Strathspey mountain bike trail – building community, and on Skye spent a day with the Portree High School geography students. These have all been great fun, satisfying and positive ways to engage with people in the outdoors as well as to educate about the importance of paths!

Shona Irvine
Activity Projects Officer

"I LOVE THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINS AND I AM AT THE STAGE I WANT TO PUT SOMETHING BACK TO THE MOUNTAINS I LOVE"

PATH VOLUNTEER

VOLUNTEERING BY NUMBERS

30 volunteer sessions

137 volunteer days

6 volunteers per session

65 different volunteers

29% female volunteers



HOW PARKING FUNDS PATHS

INCOME FROM THE BEINN A' GHLO FACILITY WILL BE INVESTED IN THE OATS ANNUAL MOUNTAIN PATH MAINTENANCE VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

The new 60-space trailhead car park on Beinn a' Ghlo in Perthshire was opened on June 7, 2023 by the MSP for Perthshire North, John Swinney. The car park will serve the many walkers visiting the three Munro summits on Beinn a' Ghlo, on the southern edge of the Cairngorms National Park.

The £172,000 partnership-building project at Loch Moraig, near Blair Atholl, was spearheaded by OATS and funded by OATS and the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA).

A share of visitor income from the parking fees will be directly re-invested into the annual OATS Volunteer Path Maintenance Programme. Hill users will be making a welcome contribution towards essential path repair on Beinn a' Ghlo and other upland paths in the Cairngorms National Park that are enjoyed by thousands of walkers every year.

JOHN SWINNEY MSP
OPENS THE CAR PARK



BEINN A' GHLO TRAILHEAD
CAR PARK IN THE FINAL
STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT





VOLUNTEER WORKING ON
THE CARN LIATH PATH

**“IT’S AN INNOVATIVE AND SUSTAINABLE
APPROACH, ENHANCING THE VISITOR
EXPERIENCE WHILST ENSURING THE
CONSERVATION OF THESE CHERISHED
LANDSCAPES”** JOHN SWINNEY MSP



Mr Swinney said: “Not only will this provide a reliable and secure parking area for visitors, but its income will also be used to maintain the very paths they tread, enabling visitors to give back to our precious highland environments.

“It’s an innovative and sustainable approach, enhancing the visitor experience whilst ensuring the conservation of these cherished landscapes for generations to come.”

The new car park complements the new Carn Liath path which replaced the scar on the mountain visible from the A9. It was repaired, with 900 metres of stone pitching, along with other paths on Beinn a’ Ghlo, in 2019. That was part of the OATS–managed The Mountains and The People Project, the £5 million partnership path restoration project in Scotland’s two national parks.

Together the new car park and path repair mean almost £400,000 has been invested in this spectacular mountain in

the Cairngorms National Park, which is both easily accessible and popular with hill users from Central Scotland.

Before the car park was built the Beinn a’ Ghlo trailhead was just an informal parking area off a narrow access road. OATS worked closely with the landowner, Lude Estate, and CNPA to find a lasting solution to protect the local environment, improve the visitor experience and raise funding for mountain path maintenance.

OATS Chief Executive Dougie Baird, said: “More and more people are taking to the hills and there is a lack of basic access infrastructure at popular remote destinations throughout Scotland. The effects can be far-reaching, with disruption to landowners, communities and businesses and damage to the very special locations that people love.

“OATS has a wealth of expertise and experience in finding collaborative partnership solutions to these access and visitor management issues.

Charging a modest sum for car–parking at trailheads, including Beinn a’ Ghlo, which is then ploughed directly back into path maintenance projects actively protects important and fragile assets and ensures visitors enjoy a positive experience. Every vehicle and their passengers make a direct contribution both to the facilities that enable the activities they love, and to the long–term conservation of Scotland’s mountains. The legacy will be huge.”



IT'S HARD WORK BUT WE LOVE IT!



ALI CAMPBELL TAKES
A WELL-EARNED REST

The Fairy Pools team is faring well. Ali Campbell started as manager of the Fairy Pools facility in August 2022 and she considers it a privilege to be part of OATS.

For me, working in this beautiful and ever-changing environment, being part of such a fine cause and a committed team, and managing this amazing infrastructure with such high footfall and vehicle numbers is an incredible experience.

The staff team at the Fairy Pools are all local to Skye: myself, my son Cameron and my daughter Megan are all born and brought up in Dunvegan. Colleagues Scott and Becky were both raised on Skye and live in the Carboist area.

This year Becky returned to the Fairy Pools for a fourth season, while Cameron and Scott are back for second one. Megan, having just finished high school, joined us in Glenbrittle for her first summer season.

TARMACKING, LINE PAINTING AND THE VISITOR SHELTER ARE BIG IMPROVEMENTS



As a team we have a lot of local knowledge, working hard to enrich the visitor experience and provide a service to many thousands of visitors and the community.

Faced with many challenges and calling on a lot of problem-solving skills, I am very proud to be working with such a dedicated team, who are always willing to seek a solution and go above and beyond to achieve it.

Myself, my staff, and contractors have faced many challenges with weather conditions and high visitor numbers to complete groundworks, tarmacking, line marking and installation of a new shelter for folk with health or mobility issues who cannot access the walk.

Tarmacking the car park was needed because the gravel surface was eroding with the high volume of traffic.

Staff had to guide every vehicle on site, with no line marking, taking a lot of people a long time working in different areas and communicating through walkie-talkies. That led to the road below us suffering congestion.

The tarmacking was finally completed, after our third attempt, finishing at the end of January, and we optimistically moved onto line marking!

After planning and measuring we set our date with the contractor for February. Unfortunately, the weather was against us and it eventually was to be on the third attempt that contractor Markon arrived on site on 11 April to start work.

It was a busy day for us all as we were right in the middle of the Easter holidays, but we worked closely with Markon and managed to accommodate the high visitor numbers.

As busy as we were, there was laughter, and understanding, with and from many grateful patrons. I, the staff, and the contractors agreed that, although it was a tough shift, it was a great one.

What was a 140-space car park now offers 177 spaces, as well as a bus area on the top level for four buses.

We can now efficiently and safely run the car park with fewer people per shift although vehicle numbers are higher than last year. To the end of August 2022 the figure stood at 56,160, but by the same point this year it was 67,224 – and these numbers do not include the many buses and tour guides on a season pass.

“TARMACKING THE CAR PARK WAS NEEDED BECAUSE THE GRAVEL SURFACE WAS ERODING WITH THE HIGH VOLUME OF TRAFFIC.”

Our stunning safe shelter is now installed beside the main facility, with a beautiful view of the Cuillin ridge and the Fairy Pools footpath.

Along with the impressive interpretation boards and seating area which is of great interest and very popular, it has completed a busy and productive year.

One last thing – I would like to thank Tony Wilkinson, who was our site supervisor for five years at the Fairy Pools, for all the hard work and dedication he gave to the organisation. Tony left OATS in June to pursue his own dreams.



Percentage breakdown of income per parking ticket 2018-2023

- 20% VAT
- 5% Management
- 10% Rent
- 25% Staff
- 27% Surplus*
- 13% Running

* Surplus goes to help fund OATS projects



DOUGIE BAIRD
OATS CEO

DELIVERING – AND THEN SOME

OATS is now past the half-way point in the 2020–25 business plan, delivering on our Skye Iconic Sites, Beinn a' Ghlo car park, Path Maintenance Volunteering and Adopt A Path projects. We are putting plans in place to develop new initiatives, including the It's Up To Us Campaign in partnership with Mountaineering Scotland, the Stac Pollaidh car park and toilets, and path-works at Charters Chest, Invercauld.

We have also invested a further £200,000 of our unrestricted income into the Fairy Pools Facility for tarmacking and line marking to ensure sustainability of the surface and maximise efficiency of the existing spaces, to ensure parking is always available even at the busiest of times.

The overarching objective in the business plan was to increase unrestricted income to make the organisation less dependent on public grants, whilst expanding our area to all of Scotland. Public funds continue to reduce since the 2008 credit crunch, and for the mountain-path sector the post-Brexit loss of European Funding has not been replaced by any other government fund.

We have taken a twin-track approach to generating unrestricted income to help address this as best we can.

OATS IS A COLLECTIVE EFFORT WHERE PEOPLE PUSH THEMSELVES TO NEW LIMITS

One involves developing more car parks in remote locations that generate income through ticket sales, such as the Fairy Pools, Beinn a' Ghlo and Stac Pollaidh.

The other is to ask those who care for the outdoors to donate to help look after them, using the It's Up To Us scheme as a pilot project to deliver on mountain-path conservation work at An Teallach through funds generated by hill users and conservationists.

In so doing we hope to make the point to decision-makers that there is a deficit here. Our outdoors tourism sector generates over £1.6 billion per year for the economy, and yet there is little to help look after this priceless resource.

OATS is a collective effort made up of staff, trustees, volunteers and contract teams. Our trustees, led by Chair Duncan Bryden, are all volunteers. Our path-maintenance volunteers work through all weather to help look after the path network, and our specialist contractors push themselves to new limits to deliver high-quality projects in sensitive locations.

Fairy Pools Facility Manager Ali Campbell and her team have done a great job on a scheme that deals with "overtourism" while generating jobs, community rent and a surplus for access projects.

Tony Wilkinson was Fairy Pools Facility Supervisor from the start and left this summer. A joy to work with, always with a smile and a joke, countless visitors wrote to thank Tony for his many kindnesses.

Shona Irvine has done a great job developing Path Volunteering and Adopt A Path schemes as we emerged from lockdown. She has also moved on, and we thank her for her efforts.

Lastly a special mention goes to Murray Swapp, OATS staffer since 2006. He developed the Deeside Way and the Speyside Way Upgrade, was key to The Mountains and The People project, worked on community paths across the north-east, and project-managed the Skye Iconic Sites Project. Murray, always an Aberdeenshire lad, moved to Aberdeenshire Council in March 2023, taking up a lead access role. We wish him well and thank him for all his work for us and for Scotland.

CHANGING GEAR

The OATS strategy in action responds to what communities and other clients tell us they need the most.

Looking forward, I would like to highlight four areas where I consider action is required to better address strategic need and deliver the quality work that is core to everything OATS does.

1. Greater recognition that upland path investment supports multiple Scottish Government priorities.

Millions of people, with more each year, rely on upland path networks to be fitter and healthier, climbing Munros or visiting waterfalls. Our path networks, arguably, provide Scotland's cheapest health care and largest visitor attraction.

The Office of National Statistics tells us the number of people gaining health benefits from outdoor exercise increased by 58%, from 7.3 million in 2009 to 11.5 million in 2020, equivalent to 21% of the UK population.

Our spectacular natural landscapes provide the motivation, and paths the means, to enable people to journey into our uplands. Their spend in hospitality businesses – especially in our rural areas – underpins much of our tourism sector. The path network's value should be more clearly recognised in the Scotland Outlook 2030 Tourism Strategy: the vision to be the world leader in 21st century tourism.

2. OATS would urge councils to use the Visitor Levy to core-fund upland path network maintenance.

The Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill introduced to the Scottish Parliament in 2023 proposes powers for councils to introduce an overnight visitor charge to generate funds to invest in local facilities and services.

Path networks are coming under much greater pressure than ever before from both growing footfall and weather events – probably linked to our changing climate. But funding for robust and regular maintenance of access facilities is hard to come by. Without it, path infrastructure is left vulnerable.

The old adage of a “stitch in time saves nine” is very apt for linear structures like paths. A small unattended repair can quickly lead to major failure and costly rebuild. OATS volunteers are a huge help in addressing these challenges but cannot possibly provide a full maintenance programme.

3. Integrating and streamlining the consents process for path work and the drawing down of public funding would be most helpful.

The OATS “trail head” model with parking, toilets and community benefits is a mechanism to retain visitor income in local economies, provide employment and improve community amenity. Some public-sector capital investment remains available for project work, but significant time and resources are required to assemble the necessary consents and funding applications. Bureaucracy prevails in requirements to track and evidence decisions taken and pennies spent along fragile rural supply chains. Integrated public sector decision-making could be improved.

4. Support to fund “Future Paths” technology including remote counters logging use levels, user apps allowing people to quickly report problems and drones recording path conditions.

The impact of the work of OATS is apparent in our visitor numbers, with almost 200,000 at the Fairy Pools and similar numbers at both the Old Man of Storr and the Quiraing, showing rapid recovery post COVID. Other upland paths and long-distance routes are seeing many more users. Technology can deliver better management data and return-on-investment evidence.

If you have any comments or questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch. I'll be delighted to hear from you:

info@outdooraccessstrustforScotland.org.uk

DUNCAN BRYDEN
OATS CHAIR





**OUTDOOR
ACCESS
TRUST FOR
SCOTLAND**

OATS IS A GROUND-BREAKING ENVIRONMENTAL CHARITY PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC ACCESS.

We develop, build and repair paths, mountain habitats and trailhead facilities to help the public, landowners and communities, protecting the country's natural heritage in popular, remote and fragile places.

OATS carries out anything from surveying and planning to full-blown campaigns and developments, all to help people to enjoy the outdoors, while protecting the environment.

Our access infrastructure is built sustainably, in partnership with others, and we train the conservation workers and volunteers of the future.

OUR SUPPORTERS

OATS can only carry out the level and standard of work it does with financial support from a wide range of organisations, public bodies, NGOs, private companies, charitable trusts and individual donors.

Thank you to all who support our work.



**FOUNTAIN MEWS
BRIDGE OF ALLAN FK9 4EN
07951 713 163**

**info@outdooraccesstrustforscotland.org.uk
www.outdooraccesstrustforscotland.org.uk**

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