



Take the right career path

A FOOTPATH construction skills training course being run by the Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust (COAT) is now underway in the Cairngorms National Park.

Eight trainees are taking part in an eight-month long course, based at various places within the park, which forms part of the Cairngorms Mountain Heritage Project.

They are Peter Dickson, 20, from Kingussie; Philip Blase, 36, from Newtonmore; 22-year-old Stuart Taggart and Julian Digby, 36, both from Inverness; Rory Thain, 24, from Aviemore; Alan Wright, 28, from North Berwick; David Allsop, 38, from Kilsyth and Nicholas McCallie, 19, from Glenrothes.

They are working towards an SVQ in environmental conservation as well as an industry recognised certificate in path skills.

The trainees did well to secure a place on the course, as competition for places was stiff; from 230 applicants, 37 were invited to attend an interview.

The interview process was carried out over three days and consisted of two parts; participation in informative walks conducted by Boyd Henderson, who has more than 20 years of experience in the footpath construction industry, and one-to-one interviews with Gordon McDonald, project training officer, and Julia Kelt from COAT.

Gordon said: "The level of interest in the training posts far exceeded our expectations but we finally got our eight and they have certainly hit the ground running."

"The trainees are with us for eight months and the course should prepare them to hopefully gain employment with the various contractors working on the four-year Cairngorms Mountain Heritage Project.

"The trainees will learn their trade on the job.

"There will be on-site instruction in building upland and lowland paths and topics such as first aid, health and safety and woodland work will also be covered, as well as other skills relevant to working in the challenging and rewarding field of conservation."

Competition for entry on to a conservation course in the Cairngorms was stiff, but its students are now making a real impact, writes Susan Welsh

Some two months into the course, the trainees have carried out maintenance work on the main footpath leading to Carn Ban Mor in Glenfeshie.

This work involved cleaning out drains and ditching with a small element of resurfacing work on the path, giving the trainees the chance to become familiar with the different elements of a footpath and how valuable simple maintenance can be in prolonging its life.

The trainees have also carried out work on Creag Bheag, near Kingussie.

Boyd said: "This popular local hill gives excellent views over the surrounding area, however, in common with many Scottish hills and mountains, it is suffering from a certain amount of erosion caused by many trampling feet.

"Here, the trainees have constructed and repaired over 200m of footpath to help combat this erosion and bring it under control.

"In the process, they have been practising dry-stone techniques, drainage methods and a wide range of other path construction skills and are already well on their way to becoming proficient in the skills necessary for a career in practical conservation."

COAT is dedicated to the development and delivery of outdoor access projects within the Cairngorms National Park and surrounding areas.

The training project receives funding from the Cairngorms National Park Authority, Scottish Natural Heritage, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and The Scottish Mountaineering Trust.