

MINISTER VISITS MOUNTAIN PATH WORKS IN CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK

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The Minister for the Environment and Climate Change, Stewart Stevenson has made a special trip to the heart of the Cairngorms National Park today to see for himself the work being carried out in the Park's hills and mountains as part of a 4-year, £2.1million path construction project. The Minister is visiting a team working out of specially created Remote Accommodation Systems, designed to allow them to live in some of Scotland's most remote and challenging country whilst they tackle the erosion scars high up on Coire Domhain.

Managed by the Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust (COAT), the Cairngorms Mountain Heritage Project is improving and enhancing 17 footpaths in the National Park's mountains, totalling 94.26kms or just over 58 miles, with some of these routes dating back to the Middle Ages.

The largest continuous area above 1,000m in the UK, the unique landscape of the Cairngorms National Park attracts more than 1.4 million visitors per year with even the most remote paths clocking up 12,000 users annually. This continuous wear along with the harsh climate conditions has caused paths to deteriorate and resulted in damage to nearby habitats.

Mr Stevenson said: "Almost one and a half million people visit Cairngorms National Park every year so it's enormously encouraging to see first hand the work that's underway to improve the path network that helps them explore this unique natural landscape.

"Some of these routes have been around since the Middle Ages, when they were used as drove tracks to move cattle from Aberdeen and it's thanks to projects like this that they'll continue to be used sustainably for many years to come.

"I am also pleased to see that local people are getting the chance to improve and enhance their skills by taking part in the environmental conservation training programme that has been running on-site."

As well as significantly improving a series of mountain paths, helping to protect the fragile environment around them; the project is also delivering a training programme for 8 local people in environmental conservation. The trainees, who started back in April, are working towards an SVQ in Environmental Conservation as well as an industry recognised certificate in path skills. The trainees are spending 8 months learning their trade 'on the job', with the course preparing them for employment with the various contractors working on the year Cairngorms Mountain Heritage Project.

There are also opportunities for communities to get involved in interpretation projects associated with the importance of the heritage of these mountain routes and an 'Adopt a Path' scheme is set to be launched soon providing volunteering opportunities through future monitoring and maintenance of these special paths.

The Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded the project £720,000 and funding has also come from the European Regional Development Fund (£722,000) and the various key agencies involved in the project including: the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA); Scottish Natural Heritage; Highlands & Islands Enterprise; Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Scottish Mountaineering Trust.

Dougie Baird, COAT Manager, said: "This project is a significant investment in the mountain heritage of the Cairngorms. It is only possible to deliver on projects such as this when we are able to bring together such a wide spread of funders, who can see the clear value in terms of sustainable tourism and conservation. This would simply not be possible in the current economic climate without grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and European Regional Development Fund."

David Green, CNPA Convener, added: "Conserving and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage is the first aim of the Cairngorms National Park, which makes this project extremely relevant. With input from a variety of agencies this project is not only going to deliver benefits in terms of caring for our mountains but will help promote local skills development."

Colin McLean, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in Scotland, said: “HLF’s support for wildlife and natural heritage projects is an important part of our work. To date, we have invested over £71.5million in land and countryside projects such as this across Scotland. By encouraging people to experience nature first-hand we are stimulating their interest in the natural world and hopefully inspiring their enthusiasm for its long-term conservation.”

Debbie Greene from Scottish Natural Heritage added: “We’re delighted to be supporting this project. As well as restoring damage to sensitive mountain plants and helping to cut down on disturbance to rare birds on the plateau, the adopt-a-path scheme is an exciting and unusual opportunity for local hillwalkers to get involved in looking after the paths they use and care about.”

The Minister’s visit to see the Mountain Heritage Project is just one in a series over the course of three days. During his time in the National Park this week Mr Stevenson has also been to the Creag Meagaidh National Nature Reserve yesterday (Wednesday 4 July) and today he has been to Insh Marshes and later will meet members of the Glenlivet Cats Protection League who are involved with the Cairngorms Wildcat Project. Tomorrow he is going to the Monitor Farm at Lost to meet with the Scottish Agricultural College and local land managers to discuss CAP reforms and other issues affecting farming before visiting Edinglassie Estate – one of the estates included in the Wildlife Estates Initiative. His visit concludes at the Linn of Dee where the Minister is meeting representatives from the CNPA, Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Dee Fisheries Board to view the impacts of various land management activities.

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