

# Minister forced to hike after helicopter failure

**Environment:** Trainees repair path for heritage project

BY SUE RESTAN

Scotland's environment minister hiked up a mountain yesterday after his helicopter was grounded.

Stewart Stevenson was in the Cairngorms National Park to see work being carried out on a £2.1million path-building project.

He had been due to fly to one site but then went to another at Coire na Ciste, as he had to walk after his aircraft suffered a technical problem.

But the minister said he was very impressed with the path building being

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carried out by a team of six trainees, who have to make the long trek every morning before starting work.

Mr Stevenson said: "It's an impressive exercise, restoring a pathway up on top of a mountain in strong wind and rain, using just the sweat of their brows to create what will be a tribute to their work for many years to come."

Their efforts form part of the four-year Cairngorms Mountain Heritage Project, which is managed by the Cairngorms Outdoor Ac-



UP HILL: MSP Stewart Stevenson visits Coire na Ciste to view the new path. Photograph: David Whittaker-Smith.

cess Trust (Coat). It involves improving and enhancing 17 footpaths in the mountains - covering just over 58 miles - some of which have been in existence since the Middle Ages when they were used as drove tracks.

Mr Stevenson said that the work made the environment more accessible to more people, while protecting the landscape from erosion by walkers.

He said: "Almost one-and-a-half million people already visit Cairngorms National Park every year and this project is giving access to more people, which has a huge economic benefit to local businesses.

"It also gives people a wider appreciation of the environment."

He added that he was pleased to see local people getting the chance to improve and enhance their

skills through the training programme.

Training officer Gordon MacDonald said: "Last year, we had 233 applications for eight trainee places and we had 164 applications for six places this year, which shows people are keen to learn these skills."

Trainee Robert McFarlane, 17, of Station Road, Carrbridge, said: "When this opportunity came up, I immediately applied and

was very surprised and really pleased when I got it as there were loads of applications. I'm really enjoying the course."

Another trainee, Lawrence Belleni, 26, of High Street, Grantown, said: "I was attracted by the range of skills on offer - from upland path work to fencing and dyking. I'm hoping to use these skills in the future, possibly to set up my own business."