

Visitor Experience Review of the Season 2014

Introduction

The National Park Authority provides a variety of opportunities and experiences for visitors to enjoy the special qualities of our National Park: from visiting the shores of Loch Lubnaig to walking or cycling the many paths or taking a boat trip on Loch Lomond.

This summer was particularly dry and mild; however we did not experience the longer spells of sunny weather and high temperatures of 2013 that coincided with weekends and school holidays. A number of other events have impacted on the season including the football World Cup and Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games. Overall we had a more even spread of activity across the season meaning a lower number of “peak demand” days than last year.

Alongside the positive aspects that still dominate most visitors’ experience of the Park, the season had its challenges. The following provides a summary of the work undertaken by the National Park Authority between April and October 2014.

It should also be noted that a significant amount of work is undertaken by our many partners, including businesses and others who contribute to the National Park’s visitor experience.

What the NPA provides

A range of services and facilities are provided by the National Park Authority:

- Ranger Service
- Volunteer Rangers
- Visitor facilities: toilets, car parks, picnic areas
- Tenanted visitor facilities: cafe/kiosks and visitor information
- National Park Visitor Centre: Balmaha
- Slipway boat launching
- Piers and pontoons

These are mostly provided in the areas of the National Park where we experience the highest demand and therefore see the greatest visitor pressure.

The 2014 season has seen the addition of new facilities at:

- Lomond Shores - new pontoon to facilitate cruises and extending the Waterbus service
- Loch Lubnaig car parks and kiosk, toilet and camping facility
- Scottish Scenic Route installations at Falls of Falloch, Loch Lubnaig and Loch Voil

The delivery and management is carried out by:

- Built facilities team
- Tourism team

- Ranger service
- Education and volunteering
- Countryside and estates management team

These teams work together to ensure visitors have positive experience of the National Park, whilst accepting that there are significant areas for improvement particularly in respect to wider visitor management issues (see Your Park consultation on www.thisisyourpark.org.uk).

What did we do?

National Park Visitor Centre: Balmaha

Season facts:

- Record number of visitors 72,942
- Busiest months: July and August 29,000

Staffing provided by the Ranger Service, opening daily from 1st April to 31st October, with extended early evening opening during July and August to 6pm.

The centre was the focal point for a dedicated programme of events & guided walks including 'Chocolate Geology', 'Amazing Autumn' and Gruffalo storytelling which attracted over 200 visitors.

The Centre provides an information and interpretation service to the public. Visitors include West Highland Way (WHW) walkers, bus tours, day visitors and holiday makers who are staying on east Loch Lomond. The vast majority of visitors coming to the centre have queries regarding their visit and these relate to:

- Things to do in the area – including visiting Inchcailloch
- Walks – Conic Hill, the Millennium Trail and the West Highland Way to Milarrochy are all popular local walks day visitors choose following a visit to the centre
- West Highland Way queries including information about camping and how long or far to their next overnight stop
- General info about the area and wider National Park
- Accommodation
- Timetables for the Waterbus and public transport

The visitor centre also provides toilet facilities, providing another reason for people to visit the centre.

National Park boat launching, piers and pontoons

Season facts:

- 3,671 boat launches from Duncan Mills Memorial Slipway and Milarrochy
- Busiest month: July with 895 launches
- Great Scottish Swim had a record number of 2,500 participants
- New pontoon at Lomond Shores for cruise and Waterbus operators

- 6 commercial boat operators using National Park Authority piers and pontoons.

Duncan Mills Memorial Slipway is the Park Authority's principle registration and launching site for powered vessels launched by a motor vehicle. The type of boat launching is mainly affected by the weather, i.e. sunny weather brings out more personal water craft and speed boats whereas fishing boats and cruisers tend to come out whatever the weather and this has been the case this year.

The small beach adjacent the slipway and to Drumkinnon bay is popular with swimmers and non-powered small craft. Triathlon and canoe clubs use the area for training in the evenings and weekends during the summer and this has increased this season in line with the growing popularity of open water swimming and canoeing. In the weeks leading up to the Great Scottish Swim the site was particularly busy in the evening with groups of swimmers.

Front of house staff regularly help visitors with the following;

- Information about the Maid of the Loch
- Information about cruises on the water
- Things to do in the area – walking, sightseeing, attractions
- Location of Loch Lomond hire boats, canoes and bikes
- Use of toilets
- General tourist questions about the Park and Scotland as a whole

There is also the opportunity for loch users to purchase lifejackets and the navigation guide for Loch Lomond and make use of the showers.

The use of the National Park Authority's piers and pontoons on Loch Lomond by commercial boat operators has been consistent with previous years, with a range of cruises, Waterbus and chartered use. In addition, during August and September when a limited cruise offer was trialled from the new Loch Lomond Shores pontoon.

National Park visitor facilities

Season facts:

- New Scottish Scenic Routes viewing platforms opened at Loch Lubnaig and Falls of Falloch
- Car park charges introduced at two new Lubnaig sites
- Toilet charges introduced at Luss toilet block
- 1,000 people used the Inchcailloch camping area
- Our litter contractors removed approximately 120 tonnes of litter

This season saw a continuation of a quality provision of opportunities for visitors to enjoy our many sites across the National Park area, with parking, picnic areas, paths, toilets and information and great scenery. The care of the sites was undertaken using contractors and Rangers, with CCMS cleaning our public toilets at Milarrochy Bay, the National Park Centre Balmaha, Duncan Mills Memorial Slipway, Firkin Point, Luss Car Park, Luss Pier and Rowardennan. Grounds maintenance is carried out by ISS including grass cutting, litter

picking, bin emptying and any remedial works. This work is also complimented by Ranger service maintenance activity as required.

A quick response system has operated over the season to provide additional resourcing in light of a good weather forecast coinciding with weekends or holiday periods. This included additional resource for litter picking and extra bin emptying at Luss.

Mystery shopper evaluations have been undertaken by our Rangers, Volunteer Rangers and facilities staff reporting back that the overall quality of the cleaning has been of an excellent standard.

Tenanted visitor facilities

Season facts:

- New Visit Scotland presence in the NP Callander Office, 35,640 visitors.
- The Cabin kiosk at Lubnaig has first successful season, with excellent user feedback

The tenanted properties for this season remained unchanged for this year – with operators at popular locations including Tarbet, Inveruglas, Luss, Loch Lubnaig, and the Gateway Centre at Loch Lomond Shores. We also welcomed VisitScotland into the downstairs area of the National Park Authority's Callander office along with new information materials and displays.

Feedback from visitors at the new Loch Lubnaig sites is that they are extremely satisfied with the new facilities, including paid parking, and would return and recommend others to stop at the site. Parking charges have generated over £5,000 of revenue and the sites have been maintained by the tenant to a high standard. Due to drainage issues and remedial work to grass areas the campsite opening will now take place from April 2015.

National Park Ranger Service

Season facts:

- We employ 60 Rangers to welcome and engage with visitors in the National Park
- Over 9,000 hours of Ranger patrolling took place across the parks busiest areas
- Rangers patrolled over 200 different sites

For this season the 28 permanent members of the Ranger Service were joined by 32 Seasonal Rangers on a mix of contract types and lengths. A Seasonal Ranger Team Leader was also appointed to manage staffing allocation and the complex rota which ensures staff are on the right places at the right times.

This year's seasonal Rangers provided over 16,000 hours of support dedicated to visitor management across the park and again proved to be fantastic ambassadors for the Park applying enthusiasm and dedication to whatever duties they were allocated.

Patrolling and Visitor Engagement

This season Rangers patrolled 22 different routes on land, that covers over 200 sites all located in the areas of the National Park that experience the most pressures from visitor use: west Loch Lomond, east Loch Lomond and the wider Trossachs. Loch Lomond is the other priority area with 7 water patrol routes and 3 routes covering the islands.

The patrols offer a platform for Rangers to interact with visitors to provide advice, assistance, information, education and a warm welcome. In addition to routine patrolling the Loch Lomond water team supported 94 non-emergency tows, calls for assistance and support to the emergency services.

The time spent on patrols this season has remained consistent with previous years, though the number of patrols undertaken is slightly less. This can be attributed to issues encountered and type of visitor interaction required resulting in more time taken to get round the sites.

| | East Loch Lomond | Wider Trossachs | West Loch Lomond | Loch Lomond | Seasonal Ranger park wide | Season Totals |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Season | 2014 | 2014 | 2014 | 2014 | 2014 | 2014 |
| Hours patrolling | 520 | 1622 | 733 | 1066 | 5867 | 9610 |
| No of patrol routes completed | 389 | 666 | 278 | 164 | n/a | 1497 |

Key visitor management data collected by Rangers whilst patrolling key sites included:

- Number of vehicles
- Number of tents
- Number of people
- Individual fire sites
- The presence & volume of litter
- Damage to site infrastructure & trees

This data helps us to analyse impact of visitors throughout the Park and has contributed to the development of visitor management strategies including Your Park and the area visitor management plans.

Patrolling facts:

- Busiest weekend was 12/13 July – the ‘Glasgow Fair’ weekend
- Highest number of tents recorded was 249 tents in one day on 12 July
- Highest number of fires recorded was 85 in one day on 12 July
- Most litter seen in one day was equivalent of 109 bags on 27 July

The Respect the Park campaign formed the basis for the promotion of responsible behaviour with the distribution of litter bags and active encouragement by Rangers when talking to groups of campers and visitors.

Byelaws

The management and enforcement of the two sets of byelaws; the Loch Lomond Byelaws 2013 and the East Loch Lomond Camping Byelaws 2011 continued as in previous years with Rangers ensuring the public were aware of the byelaws and if in breach appropriate actions were taken.

In the east Loch Lomond camping management zone, from 1st March to 31st October Rangers approached 70 people who were in breach of the byelaws i.e. had either put up a tent or were about to. All these cases were resolved by either leaving the zone or using one of the locally available camp sites. We are pleased to report that this proactive approach meant no reports were made to the Procurator Fiscal this season.

Safety is paramount and our patrols on Loch Lomond help it make the loch a safer place for everyone. On Loch Lomond 122 infringements of the navigation byelaws were recorded, a decrease of 46% on last year. These were mainly linked to speeding incidents resulting in staged warnings being issued. Two reports were made to the Procurator Fiscal: one individual was charged with 3 separate contraventions (no life jacket, speeding and displaying the wrong annual marks) and the other report was for failure to carry sufficient life jackets.



Operation Ironworks and Policing

Operation Ironworks took place over 20 weekends between the Easter weekend and the end of September. The Ranger Service continued to work closely with Police Scotland, the full details of this year's operation will be included in the annual review document, available in December 2014.

This is the 6th year of the Employer Supported Policing scheme and currently there are two members of National Park Authority staff who are Special Constables: one member of the

Ranger service and the other from the visitor planning and engagement team. Collectively they have provided 184 hours of ESP time between April and September on Operation Ironworks and visitor management duties as well as duties relating to wildlife crime.

Visitor Experience Activities

53 groups of people of all ages, including 1,547 students, have experienced Ranger-led educational sessions in the Park this season. This included outreach work with schools and special needs groups from the local area and elsewhere in Scotland and the UK.



The Ranger service also supported 98 practical conservation tasks during the period April to September which involved over 200 volunteers, contributing a total of 2,430 hours, tasks have included:

- Biological monitoring involving lichen, wetland birds, black grouse & butterfly surveys
- Invasive species control
- West Highland Way maintenance
- West Loch Lomond cycle path clearance
- Tree planting
- Community clean ups
- Clanscape event planning and delivery

Volunteer Rangers

The Volunteer Rangers key roles were:

- Providing a welcome and inspiring visitors
- Providing a National Park presence at events and in our villages and towns
- Assisting with visitor enquiries at our National Park Headquarters in Balloch.
- Helping the National Park Ranger service and partners to deliver education and events.

This season's Volunteer Ranger programme delivered 161 separate events and involved 231 individuals. They spent a total of 3,724 hours on allocated routes and areas to ensure visitors have a great experience of the National Park by sharing their passion for the Park.



Volunteer Rangers provided 323 hours of support for education and 680 hours of support events. Most support was given to internal requests from our Ranger service, and also tourism, planning and communications teams with an element provided to external requests from Forestry Commission Scotland, Woodland Trust Scotland and National Trust for Scotland amongst others.

The events supported included Callander Meadows discovery days, a walk with Deaf Blind Scotland, partnership events such as taking the Mobile Visitor Centre to the Commonwealth Festival in Callander, enhancing National Park presence at the Baton Relay, preparing for and organising delegates for the Scenic Routes launch and providing information and highlighting their role on the John Muir Conference east Loch Lomond study tour.

Conclusion

This season highlighted the continued popularity of the National Park as a place to enjoy the outdoors and in particular the lochshore sites that attract most visitors. Our delivery of services and facilities went well with a built in flexibility to respond to good weather and periods of demand, ensuring that we had Rangers out and about at peak times and engaging with a variety of visitors. Work now begins on preparations for next season with the Seasonal Ranger recruitment processes about to begin, and contracts ready to be let for grounds maintenance and toilet cleaning.