Upland Path Management

IMPACT OF FOOTPATH EROSION ON UPLAND HABITATS

The National Park is a fantastic recreation resource, providing opportunities for different physical activities in an outstanding environment. With many popular hill routes, the area is used regularly by walkers which can result in pressures on certain sensitive hill and mountain habitats.

Ben A’an, at 454m, isn’t the tallest of hills but is certainly one of the most popular in the Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park.

Loved and conquered by many, the ‘wee hill’ is easily accessible from anywhere in the central belt and can offer a range of walking and climbing experiences.

It provides an easy to moderate walk with something for people of all ages, however, the final ascent to the summit is steep and more physically demanding. The popularity of this walk makes it a jewel in the crown of hill paths within the Trossachs and with spectacular views from the summit of Ben Venue, Loch Katrine and as far, on a clear day, as the Arrochar Alps, it is thoroughly worth the effort.

Ben A’an is owned and managed by Forestry Commission Scotland. Works began in October 2014 to improve the habitat on the hill. These works are part of The Great Trossachs Forest Project, which aims to restore a large scale area of Scotland’s native woodland. During these works all the non-native trees were felled and part of the area will be re-planted with native trees.

The Problem

The path, having previous works dating from around the 1980’s, has over the years suffered badly from drainage and erosion issues.

Erosion on the Ben A’an hill path was caused by a combination of factors, both human and physical. Hikers boots, mountain bikes, horseriding and livestock grazing can all play a part in damaging the path. These factors combined with natural forces, such as wind strength and direction, rainfall, frost, type of rock and vegetation as well as the angle of the slope compound the problem.

This erosion, along with drainage problems, had resulted in a boggy and rough path. The majority of people hill walking in Scotland prefer to stay on the paths as they feel safer, however when the path is in a poor condition, walkers start to walk around the edges, or avoid the built path altogether. This results in a wider path with multiple routes. The average width of the path on Ben A’an was 3 metres, 2 metres wider than it should be. This widening of the path has reduced the quality of the surrounding habitat.
The Solution

Due to the severity of the erosion problem on Ben A’an and the high volume of people using the path, it was identified as a priority for upgrading as part of The Mountains & The People project. This is a flagship project of the Cairngorm Outdoor Access Trust in partnership with the Heritage Lottery Fund, Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Scotland’s two National Park Authorities, Cairngorms and Loch Lomond & The Trossachs.

Following a detailed survey, it was decided to build a ‘high and dry’ type path, using on site materials, whilst following the old path line and incorporate any suitable existing path features. The solution to use this method of path construction will effectively ‘lift’ users out of the boggy sections and create a much more discernible, usable and long-lasting path.

The path building included both machine and hand build, with one section being built completely by hand due to the topography and access difficulties for machines. There was not enough stone on site to build the whole path, this meant importing 120 tonnes of stone from a local quarry. This stone was brought to site by a helicopter.

The repaired Ben A’an hill path has greatly improved the route, making it easier and more enjoyable for people of all ages. The new path reduces the maintenance requirement for the path which means that this popular path will be open to all in the long term. This will have long term benefits, not just for the local area and habitats, but the wider communities and users who can enjoy this hill experience well into the future.
Conflicting National Park aims:
As a National Park Authority we regularly have to make difficult decisions over what is the best way to proceed. At the heart of these decisions are two, sometimes conflicting, National Park Aims.
- To conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the Park
- To promote understanding and enjoyment (including enjoyment in the form of recreation) of the special qualities of the Park by the public

Resolution and role of the National Park Authority
The National Park helps to address these issues in various ways:
- As the Access Authority, the National Park Authority provides advice to land managers and the public on access rights, and promotes responsible behaviour in the countryside.
- National Park Ranger Service promote the Scottish Outdoor Access Code
- Under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, the National Park Authority must prepare a Core Paths Plan which sets out a network of routes for visitors and residents to enjoy the special qualities of the National Park. Core paths have an important role to play in ensuring that people can easily get around and enjoy the Park in a way that minimises the potential for conflict with people who manage the land.
  This includes keeping paths away from sensitive sites:
- For more information on our Core Paths visit our website.

Questions and pupil enquiry
- What are the main causes of footpath erosion?
- What are the problems caused by footpath erosion?
- What factors should be considered when importing stone to build the path?
- What are the main benefits to a well-constructed footpath at Ben A'an?

FURTHER GUIDANCE
- Online
  - Forestry Commission Scotland: Ben A'an
  - The Mountains & The People project
  - The Great Trossachs Forest
  - Upland path work manual
- Interactive
  - 360 view from the top of Ben A'an