

Upland Path Advisory Group Site Visit

Carn Ban Mor Path, Glen Feshie, 16 August 2012

Hosted by Fran Potheary and Bob Grant from Cairngorms National Park Authority

In attendance: Glyn Jones (Balmoral Estate), Mark Hedderwick (contractor), Chris Goodman and Sandy Maxwell (JMT), Fiona Cuninghame (SNH), Katrina Brown (Hutton Institute), Jules Fincham (Cyclewild), Thomas McDonnell (Glenfeshie Estate), Johnnie Grant (Rothiemurchus), Richard Fox (Lake District National Park), Gilbert McNeil, Stuart Thomson and Kenny Auld (Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority), Graham McLean (Scottish Cycling), Al Gilmour (Glenmore Lodge), Angus Robertson, Murray Flett, Paul Masson (Cycletherapy), Bruce Wilkinson (Loch Lomond and the Trossachs Countryside Trust), Eilidh Robb and Attila Kish (Cairngorm Mountain) and Ruraidh MacDonald.

Introduction

The Upland Path Advisory Group (UPAG) brings together path designers and builders with a wide range of other interested parties. These include policy and advisory officers, land managers, trusts, public agencies and user groups. The purpose of the visit is to provide an opportunity for everyone involved to exchange views, learn from practical examples, and consider potential solutions to path problems in the uplands.

The Glen Feshie visit was arranged to consider a range of topics affecting mountain biking and path design in the uplands. The outputs from the discussions would assist the following:

- Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has recognised that the Upland Path Manuals have proved to be very useful but now need minor alterations to keep them up to date. Changes to include: Health and Safety and the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2007 (CDM), working practices such as the use of remote accommodation systems for mountain path repairs, and turf lined ditches. SNH are keen to develop a small working group to take forward the revisions to the manuals, and are looking for volunteers to become involved in this process.
- Cairngorms National Park Authority is working with partners to develop cycling (on and off-road) in the National Park, and is also looking to re-refresh the Outdoor Access Strategy which is dated, particularly relating to mountain biking in the uplands.

The Path

The Carn Ban Mor path has gone through a series of repairs over recent years that date back to 1993, and work has been done on the lower and middle sections as recently as this year. It was made clear at the start of the discussion that the path should be used for illustrative purposes to bring out particular issues, rather than a critique of the path work carried out, and this was very much the theme of the day.

Twenty four people attended and considered a range of issues as they made their way from the Achlean car park to a point approximately 2 kms up the path and at a height of roughly 570m.

The following broad themes were discussed, with key points detailed below:

- Design
- Behaviour
- Communication / information

- Knowledge

Design

This theme attracted the greatest amount of discussion. The overarching debate centred round whether it was possible to design a mountain path that would be able to accommodate both walkers and cyclists. Path features that were discussed in most detail were water bars and cross drains. Could water bars be re-designed in a manner that they could still deflect water off a path, but would not be of such a height or design that they either proved to be obstacles to some riders, or were likely to result in pinch punctures? Having the top (uphill) side of the bar more rounded was suggested and this has been tried on a number of paths. Problems that could occur were failure of the bar to work effectively if it was too low, with the likelihood of surface material being deposited in front of it resulting in either failure or a more frequent requirement for maintenance. Also braiding and spreading could result if the design was impassable to bikes. A technique that has been used with some success on Cairngorm Mountain paths is removing a scallop of path surface to create a run-off point and this can be put in place and restored with a spade.

Cross drains were viewed by cyclists as a significant barrier with inexperienced or tired riders more likely to dismount to cross. Resulting issues were braking grooves immediately before the cross drains and, from a cyclists perspective, a path that did not 'flow'. The need to manage water across a path was understood and options such as culverts and fords were discussed with potentially higher maintenance costs for culverts being highlighted as they can block with debris or occasionally snow.

The issue of path alignment came up on a number of occasions. The design of bespoke mountain bike trails, designers try and keep gradients down to around 10% (6 degrees). Repairing existing upland paths is not likely to ever achieve these gradients. The question was posed about who the path should be for and what expectations people should have in relation to use. The motivation for path repairs to date have been about minimising landscape and ecological impacts and the user has largely been of secondary consideration although the alignment and surface have to be sufficiently attractive to encourage users to stay on a path.

Should future path repairs consider the possibility of multi-use? Management and maintenance issues were explored and whether or not multi-use paths would incur a higher capital and on-going maintenance cost. Re-construction in the first instance that takes account of potential multi-use is likely to have lower maintenance burden than paths that have been re-constructed solely for walkers. As discussed above, some of the more bike friendly water management features may however have a higher capital cost. Relative maintenance costs for such features are not as yet known.

There was discussion about how paths evolve and change over time and through use. People's perception of a path is often related to how they first experience it. For example, the Carn Ban Mor track in the early nineties looked very much as it does currently i.e. smoothed out - and it had degraded over time (becoming more 'interesting' for some bikers) at which point intervention was deemed necessary to protect the landscape and control erosion.

This led to a suggestion that the differences within interest groups are as great as those between - e.g. there are bikers and walkers who appreciate path enhancement, and equally bikers and walkers for whom it ruins a path.

Behaviour

The focus of discussion was on the existence and degree of inter-user conflict. Whilst the Scottish Outdoor Access Code was cited as giving a clear steer on the need for cyclists to

give way to walkers, the practicality was quite different on the ground. This was borne out by recent research which indicated a more elaborate choreography between user types. Walkers regularly stepped aside for cyclists and therefore, should messages about responsible behaviour change, and should path designers consider this behaviour when looking at the useable surface and the path margin? This was most noticeable with 'high and dry' paths where stepping off the line may mean going on to a steep battered cross slope.

Politeness and giving warnings in advance were seen as the key approaches to avoiding conflict. Sight lines too came out of this discussion and moderating speeds was seen as the most appropriate action, as was riding in the expectation that cyclists could meet walkers.

How much space do people need to pass? The amount of space a proficient cyclist needs to pass a walker is likely to be much less than the space a walker feels comfortable in being close to a bike. This difference can be the source of conflict and one that users need to be aware of if they are to be considered as behaving responsibly.

Communication / Information

Much of the existing cycling on upland paths is not promoted through conventional channels. Social media, particularly 'You Tube', word of mouth, local clubs (both formal and informal) appear to be the main sources of information on this type of cycling. There have been a few articles in more mainstream magazines which have caused concern to some landowners and others. Concerns raised focus on increasing numbers and potential damage. It was suggested that a direct approach to such magazines, having an article written by a professional journalist, that incorporated key messages, is likely to have a much greater chance of acceptance than any number of well intentioned press releases. Engagement with clubs was also seen as important if we wish to be successful in encouraging responsible behaviour.

There was some discussion about whether information could be centralised in some way with one agency or individual responsible for disseminating up to date information about path condition, land management operations etc. However there was recognition that this would be extremely onerous and that making more use of existing communication networks like Forums, and engaging the whole community of local bikers and land managers in this might be a better approach.

Knowledge

How much upland path cycling is taking place is not known but it was confirmed that visitor counters do exist that can differentiate between walkers and cyclists. Consideration might be given to installing such a counter on one or two popular upland paths to get some indication of usage.

There are a number of relevant pieces of research that have taken place but there is very little knowledge of them beyond the academic world. Such research covers many of the topics relating to behavioural issues that have been discussed and there is merit in finding means of putting this into layman terms so that all can learn from the research.

There was a suggestion that a section of path (one that experiences multi-use) should be identified, which could be the subject of experimental path work, such as light touch work.