

UPAG Site Visit – 2nd July 2013

Hosted by: Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust

Venue: Braeriach, Cairngorms National Park

Attendees:

Nic Bullivant – Cairngorm Mountain Ranger Service	Chris Goodman - JMT
James Brownhill - CAPS volunteer	Richard Fox - LDNPA
Jasmin Cameron – CAPS volunteer	Gilbert McNeill - LLTNPA
Ken Thomson – CAPS volunteer	John Atkinson - NT - Lake District
Lizzie Cooper- COAT	Fiona Cuninghame - SNH
Gordon White - COAT	Charles Gameson - UPT
	Chris York – Walking-the-Talk

Introduction

Lizzie Cooper from the Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust (COAT) provided background information about the Cairngorms Mountain Heritage Project – the funding and scale of the work being undertaken. The main aspects being explored during the site visit being the Remote Accommodation Systems (RAS) and the Cairngorms Adopt-A- Path Scheme (CAPS). Heritage Lottery Fund and the European Regional Development Fund is providing a large skelp of the money and support has also come from Cairngorms National Park Authority, Scottish Natural Heritage, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, SMT and RSPB.

Braeriach Site Visit

Rothiemurchus Estate kindly allowed UPAG to use the estate vehicle track as far as Rothiemurchus Lodge, and from there the group walked across to the site of the Sinclair Hut on the Lairig Ghru path in deteriorating weather conditions. High winds made full group discussions difficult so there may have been other ideas exchanged than those reported here.

Cairngorms Adopt A Path Scheme (CAPS)

The Lairig Ghru path has been adopted by one of the volunteers who attended the site visit and this was an opportunity to explain some of the background to the scheme, how it is working and some of the challenges and opportunities in running this type of volunteer scheme.

The original ideas for CAPS were developed through working with North East Mountain Trust (NEMT) and the objective is to use volunteers to help with the maintenance of the paths that are managed by COAT. Chris York from Walking-the-Talk is the coordinator of the scheme, dealing with the administration, recruitment and training.

The aim of CAPS is to integrate volunteer action with the maintenance programme to provide added value to the contracted-out maintenance – volunteers report on the condition of paths, this information is prioritised and fed to the contractors before they start the annual maintenance programme. The outcomes of the maintenance then need to be fed back to the volunteers. It is

envisaged that the paths that have been adopted will be given priority so that there is a clear link between volunteer input and maintenance output.

As well as doing the surveys, volunteers are encouraged (but not expected) to undertake minor maintenance tasks on their adopted paths. This is limited to clearance of drainage features and does not involve any repair of structures. This probably sets the scheme apart from other volunteer path programmes that tend to focus more on repair and practical maintenance tasks.

The process is evolving as a result of feedback from volunteers and the contractors who are doing the maintenance. The main focus of CAPS is to gather information about the condition of the paths to allow COAT and the contractor to prioritise resources. The surveys need to be done as close to the time of the maintenance so that the information is up to date – maintenance is done in spring and autumn but the exact timing can vary to fit with other path work being done by the contractor. The volunteers are encouraged to use a proforma so that information is provided in a consistent format. It is recognised that there is a range of approaches to recording information that need to be accommodated and different paths require different levels of detail. There are 17 volunteers who have adopted 20 paths, of a total of 50 within the current scheme. The first full year of operation was 2012 and 10 paths were surveyed and reports submitted. In 2013 three path reports have been produced.

A useful way of recording path condition is with photos – if these can be ‘geo-located’ they are even more useful. Free software (e.g. Geosetter) is available that can match digital images with GPS tracks (providing that the clock on the camera is set properly!) these images can then be plotted on maps very easily. Over time, this will help to build up a record of how the paths are responding to use and environmental conditions.

The reports are submitted to the coordinator, usually by email, and these are then collated and interpreted for inclusion of tasks in the maintenance programme. Some of the reports have been uploaded onto the CAPS website but a more efficient system for managing the data is being pulled together.

The ‘Fix The Fells’ programme was briefly explained by Richard Fox (Lake District National Park) – this was a useful comparison of another volunteer scheme:

Fix the Fells has been running since 2007 and works on the basis of volunteers doing practical work on upland paths. Surveys of path condition and work specifications are done by Rangers and there is an online management system to help record work done. Volunteers have to commit to a minimum of 12 work days per year in order to participate in the scheme and are given practical training before doing any work – approximately 20 new volunteers are recruited each year.

There are a series of tools stores across the Park and volunteers organise themselves to work in small groups. This means that individual volunteers are likely to work on different paths during their time with the scheme. Over 200 paths have been repaired through Fix the Fells (which also includes work by contractors).

The Sinclair Line and Sron na Lairig

Gordon White from COAT explained the background to the realignment of this path, which provides a link from the Lairig Ghru / Chailmain Gap to Braeriach summit. The existing path, built about 8

years ago is in poor condition and its alignment means that many people do not use this route. The new alignment, although steeper, is closer to the desire line and the old path will be hidden by landscaping.



There are three contracts underway concurrently, which have been awarded to three different contractors – all of whom were on site during the visit. There are some subtle differences in the style of construction, which probably relate to the respective ‘ethos’ of each company. All appear to be of a high quality and there was some discussion about the aesthetics of the landscaping / finishing on the different sections. Opinions varied on this but the mid section was seen as the ‘least favoured’.

Upland Access Limited have been awarded the contract for the lower Sinclair Line and this is ‘new build’ on steep ground, possibly exploiting some damaged ground from previous desire lines. There is a mix of block pitching and anchored aggregate to give a varied path surface. At the time of visit drainage was being added along with comprehensive landscaping.

Stonescape have been awarded the Upper Sinclair Line contract. This follows the ‘direct’ desire line and joins the failed original path. The ground is less steep than the Lower section and is being built with a mix of aggregate and block pitching. The surfacing materials available on this section appear to be sandier than the lower line but contain some silt / clay helping to bind the material (an unusual situation in this part of the Cairngorms!). At the time of the visit the team were adding surfacing from the borrow pits.



Cairngorm Wilderness Contracts have been awarded the contract for the Sron na Lairig section. This includes work on deep, steep peat on the lower part where a full-build solution of block pitching and aggregate is being used, through to lower impact (light touch) work to define a preferred line on the upper section. At the time of the visit the team were completing a stone pitching and undertaking landscaping work. This team is using the Remote Accommodation System.

Remote Accommodation System (RAS)

RAS consists of modular units that are flown onto site to provide a base for path teams where the walk-in time becomes a significant part of the working day (i.e. more than 3 hours in total). The units are bespoke containers (each section weighing under 1 tonne for flying purposes) that provide all services including sleeping, cooking facilities and toilets. Power is supplied by a battery system

charged by diesel generator. The full specifications have been supplied in the handout sheet for the site visit.



This RAS is a replacement for the previous 'flat-pack' version and appears to be more robust. It was deployed at the Shelter Stone in 2012 and is stored at Mar Lodge over the winter. There have been 'teething troubles' mostly relating to the power supply – the 'intelligent' management system might be just a bit too clever for its own good...



The contractors reported reasonable satisfaction with the accommodation and facilities. Issues include midge nets (the Velcro on the inside of windows is ineffectual!) and the need for careful housekeeping to keep the kitchen area habitable. The floor paint in the kitchen area helps with this (it makes it easier to sweep and mop, being smoother than the previous surface). The current contractor operates a flexible working scheme so that team members are off site at different times. This has the benefit of allowing more frequent supplies of fresh food – this is reported to be an important aspect of comfort. Design feedback from the contractor included the orientation of the dining table – they would have preferred 'in line' dining rather than face-to-face seating, but this may well vary between contractors!



Weather conditions at the time of the visit (high wind!) helped to reinforce the value of the RAS.