

## Parliamentary Briefing

Members' business debate, Wednesday 15 January 2020  
World Wetlands Day [S5M-20295]



### Summary

- Scotland's wetlands are not only vitally important for our biodiversity and ecosystems, but many of them also provide valued opportunities for outdoor recreation and public enjoyment.
- There is growing evidence of the value to our mental health of spending time near water.
- Outdoor recreation is an important way of helping Scotland's population improve their physical and mental health, but it needs proper investment and support from the government.

Ramblers Scotland fully supports this motion which celebrates Scotland's world class wetlands and the vital role they play for biodiversity and our ecosystems. It is particularly relevant to highlight the value of Scotland's wetlands during this Year of Coast and Waters and recognise the importance of protecting our coasts and wetlands, especially when they hold national or international designations which demonstrate their value both to people and to nature.

We would also like to take the opportunity to highlight the additional value of our wetlands as places for recreation and public enjoyment. Scotland has 51 Ramsar sites, and among them are iconic and much-loved areas for walking and other forms of recreation such as parts of Loch Lomond, the Firth of Clyde and the Firth of Forth. Our lochs, rivers and coasts are also the settings for many of Scotland's long distance routes, such as the [John Muir Way](#) and the [West Highland Way](#), as well as the growing number of coastal paths like the [John o'Groats Trail](#) and [Ayrshire Coastal Path](#). With appropriate visitor management, such as creation of paths and informative signage, members of the public can enjoy the wild qualities of our coasts and waters without causing undue disturbance to the wildlife which needs our protection. The case study of Loch Leven in Kinross is outlined below. This shows how the development of the heritage trail has attracted 250,000 people each year into the area to walk around a loch which is highly designated for nature conservation, with all the health and economic benefits that brings both to individuals and the area.

As an example of a wetland and coastal area of great recreation value which is currently under threat, we are awaiting the government's decision following a public inquiry relating to a proposed golf development at Coul Links in Sutherland, a Special Protected Area and Ramsar site. We took part in the public inquiry to ensure that arguments were heard relating to the wild qualities of the landscape and public enjoyment of the site, which we believe would be permanently damaged by the creation of a golf course.

While it's acknowledged that golf tourism brings an economic boost to Scotland, there is also a massive economic benefit which arises from walking-related activities which not only benefits health but also directly supports rural economies. VisitScotland has estimated the [value to the Scottish economy of walking tourism](#) at £1.26 billion per year. SNH's 2012 [Scottish Recreation Survey](#) estimated the value of expenditure during visits to the outdoors by Scottish residents at around £2.6 billion. These figures were borne out by the Scottish Government's 2015 [marine recreation and tourism survey](#) which estimated that marine tourism is worth £3.7 billion to the Scottish economy, of which £2.4 billion was associated with general recreation and tourism such as coastal walks.

In terms of the health benefits of being close to water, the EU [BlueHealth](#) project has been building evidence of the value of water-based environments to our health and wellbeing. For example, [research](#) published last October investigated the wellbeing effects of living close to the sea and found that living by the coast supported better mental health in England's poorest urban communities.

We welcome the Scottish Government's recognition of the importance of walking in helping the Scottish population to be more active in their daily lives and the ongoing delivery of the [National Walking Strategy](#). We are pleased to be delivery partners for the strategy. But it is clearly important to continue investing in outdoor recreation to enable more people to be active. For walking, whether by lochs, rivers or on the coast elsewhere, this means funding for paths, bridges, signposts and other infrastructure, as well as for promotion and the provision of information. Yet there is uncertainty about

much of the future funding in this sector. We are aware that cuts in local authority budgets have led to significant impacts on ranger services, access officers and other areas which are important for getting people active outdoors. We welcomed the introduction of the [Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund](#) which includes support for rural path projects and we recognise the government has increased funding for active travel. However, with overall reductions in public spending, walking and outdoor recreation more generally are in need of much more support.

By investing in achieving public health outcomes, particularly through both outdoor recreation and active travel in Scotland's wonderful landscapes, the Government can make progress in achieving its aim of creating a more healthy, wealthy and active Scotland and enabling people to transform their lives through increased physical activity. This is particularly important when we are faced with the Climate Emergency and the need to switch to more sustainable forms of transport. Our coasts and waters are a particularly valuable recreational resource, which we are pleased to be celebrating this year.

### **Case study: Loch Leven Heritage Trail, Kinross – Ramsar site and Special Protected Area**

The establishment of Scottish access rights can be credited with being the impetus for the development of this 21km circular trail around Loch Leven. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 led to a review of byelaws which had restricted access to the loch and ushered in the opportunity to create this trail in a location which is protected for nature conservation at both national and international levels.

Loch Leven is a large, shallow, freshwater loch and home to the largest collection of breeding ducks in Europe and is also used by tens of thousands of wildfowl during the winter months. From 2005 the vision of a trail to celebrate both the cultural and natural heritage of the area began to gain momentum with the local paths group, TRACKS, raising funding for the route. SNH was heavily involved in designing the mitigation measures required to protect the wildlife given the anticipated higher levels of public access on the site. Construction began in 2007 and the complete trail opened in 2014, including new or upgraded path links into the surrounding settlements. The route is barrier free and mostly level, providing excellent access for walkers, cyclists, wheelchair users and buggies.

The fact that the best time for watching the birdlife is over the winter has meant that the trail is well-visited throughout the year. As well as being connected to facilities in local settlements, a number of farm shops and cafes have opened in the area in recent years, often linked to farm diversification, and while they were not directly opened in anticipation of the trail's creation, there is a recognition that they have clearly benefited from the increase in visitors to the area. For example, the year-round attraction of the loch means that businesses are able to continue to operate during the winter months, giving them greater confidence in the expectation of returns when expanding their premises.

Visitor numbers are now in the region of 250,000 per year. Given the sensitivities of the site, much effort has been taken to mitigate potential disturbance to the wildlife and to educate users, especially dog-walkers. Monitoring by SNH showed that compliance with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code among dog-walkers had risen from 52% in 2007 to 94% in 2012. Issues remain but SNH and the rangers have worked hard on educational materials and management measures to reduce the problem. Monitoring of the wildlife shows that levels of different species have fluctuated over the years but there does not appear to have been any lasting negative impact on the bird numbers due to the trail's establishment.

Ramblers Scotland is a membership organisation and charity with a grassroots network of 54 local groups who run 3,500 group walks a year, organised and led by experienced volunteers. As the representative body for walkers in Scotland and a governing body of sport, we work to champion walking, protect and promote access rights and develop our path networks. We are part of the Ramblers, Britain's walking charity.

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