

Active Cairngorms: consultation response

7th April 2015

Introduction

Ramblers Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation for the Active Cairngorms revised outdoor access strategy. Ramblers Scotland is a membership organisation with 6,500 members and 55 walking groups across Scotland all run by volunteers. We are the representative body for walkers in Scotland, and we are recognised by **sportscotland** as a governing body of sport. A number of our groups are based within and around the national park, in Badenoch & Strathspey, Inverness, Strath Tay, Perth, Blairgowrie and Moray, while many others visit and walk in the national park.

We are very supportive of the overall direction the Active Cairngorms strategy is proposing, and our comments are restricted to those aspects where we can give additional suggestions.

1. Is the overall aim of encouraging residents and visitors to be active outdoors every day an appropriate ambition for Active Cairngorms?

We believe this is an appropriate ambition, but feel that the introductory pages of the document do not set out a clear enough vision and justification as to why this should be the focus of an outdoor access strategy in the Cairngorms. We understand that the park is aiming to increase physical activity opportunities for both residents and visitors, by focussing on the provision and promotion of outdoor recreation facilities such as paths and other facilities for leisure and for active travel purposes. However, the document does not identify a particularly inactive population within the park – indeed the infographic on p6 rather suggests an active population given that half of residents visit the outdoors on a daily basis and 85% of visits to the countryside involve walking.

Our suggestion for a coherent and aspirational vision would be to focus on making the park an exemplar for how rural communities across Scotland can be more active in their daily lives. In the same way that the national park authority aims to demonstrate good practice in terms of land management and sustainable economic activity, we believe that this strategy should be seen as a way of directly challenging the reliance on private car-based transport for both residents and visitors. It should illustrate how behaviour can be changed to create a culture of physically active lives which will provide a model for local authorities in rural areas across the country.

Currently, much of the focus on active travel in Scotland is for shorter journeys around urban areas, and yet in rural areas it can be difficult to walk or cycle for journeys of even a few kilometres if there are no safe routes linking communities and places of interest. Many otherwise active people will drive short distances to walk their dogs, go for a run or take the children to school. Visitors arrive by car and then predominantly use their cars to travel around the park since public transport is often not sufficiently encouraged, nor is information on bus routes, etc, easily accessible to visitors. Other barriers include the problems of rural roads being too narrow and unsuitable for vulnerable users, even if the level of traffic is not particularly high. Similarly, off road routes may not be used for a period of months if they are not lit in winter or cleared of snow and ice in the same way as roads. These challenges face most rural areas and there is a clear opportunity here for the Park to work with local communities and tourism organisations to change culture and behaviour.

2. Are the priorities identified in the three strategic themes the best focus for activity to deliver Active Cairngorms?

We believe these are suitable themes. Our one concern is that there is no mention of upholding Scottish access rights within the Active Management theme. We believe this should be seen as part of the policy of *Increasing understanding and enjoyment of the Park's special qualities*, which makes reference to promotion of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, capercaillie management and responsible camping. In our view, the park authority has an important role in ensuring that land managers are also playing their part in ensuring a welcoming countryside for residents and visitors. Any obstructions in the form of non-compliant signage, locked gates, electrified deer fencing, etc, can be a serious discouragement for people to get outdoors, especially those who are less confident of their rights and responsibilities. We therefore feel that a key part of this strategy should be to ensure that access rights are being protected.

3. Does Active Cairngorms contain the right policies to promote and manage outdoor access in the National Park?

Active Places:

2.3 We support the aim to increase use of the public transport network. Often, this comes down to better promotion of the services which are on offer, by working with tourism businesses within the park to demonstrate, for example, walking routes which can start from or finish at a bus stop, or more easily accessible information on bus services. This should be written from the perspective of a visitor who doesn't know place names along the route and might appreciate a map of the area showing where the bus goes, rather than simply a link on the website of a visitor attraction to the Traveline Scotland service.

2.4 We support the focus on active travel links for local trips and suggest this is done on a criteria basis to capitalise on improving those routes which bring the easiest wins, in terms of both enabling as many residents as possible to use the routes for trips to school, etc, but which are also valuable routes for local leisure and tourism activities. The Local Outdoor Access Forum can give valuable advice on identifying such routes.

Active management:

3.2 While we support the work to protect capercaillie populations from undue disturbance caused by recreation, it is imperative that local communities are involved in this work to enable them to feel ownership of the programmes, especially if they are being asked to restrict their behaviour at certain times. We also would highlight that the Cairngorms Capercaillie Framework document makes it clear that there are many other factors which also affect capercaillie numbers, such as deer fencing, habitat loss and predation. Therefore it is important to ensure a balanced approach. Positive access management will make it more likely that the majority of people using these areas adhere to any requests to avoid certain parts of the forests at certain times of the year.

Policy 5 refers to the use of voluntary car parking charges to raise funding for path provision. We support such charges being made on a voluntary basis, but it is important that it is made clear to anyone who is being asked to pay for parking exactly where that funding is going. There will be a number of different car park operators within the park, and so the park authority should work with these partners to ensure such clarity, and, where possible, similar levels of parking charges with a separate system for residents making repeat visits.

Active Promotion:

4.1 Once again, we believe the Park has a role in acting as an exemplar to the rest of Scotland. This strand of work should be monitored to provide evidence of how behavioural change has been brought about in order to help others elsewhere in the country learn from this experience.

Policy 8 refers to the Walking to Health programme, but we would point out that these short walks are valuable interventionist tools which will not appeal to all residents within the Park who might

want to be more active or do different activities. We hope the Park will make links with other established groups (walking, cycling, horseriding, watersports, etc) which also exist within the Park so that pathways to further activity are promoted and established.

Policy 8 also refers to a Voluntary Ranger scheme to be developed and this is something we very much support. We suggest that existing community and activity groups, such as Ramblers groups, would be useful contacts as a starting point to establish a ranger scheme.

4. Will the Action Plan deliver the strategy, and what can you or your organisation contribute to the Action Plan?

As a governing body of sport and representational body for walkers, Ramblers Scotland would be pleased to help the Park deliver this strategy where we can add value to the work which is taking place. We are always happy to further promote events or initiatives taking place within the Park, both at a national level and to our groups within the Park. In addition, Ramblers Scotland has a number of regular initiatives to encourage more people to walk, such as our Festival of Winter Walks and Get Outdoors weekend, and we would be pleased if the Park would reciprocally promote these events.

In terms of specific projects, we currently have 4 Medal Routes hubs, each with 3 circular routes, based within the Park and would be pleased to discuss other locations for more hubs. These short walks are aimed at local residents, and those who are less active but they also have huge tourism potential when based at visitor attractions or local accommodation centres, to encourage people to explore the local paths nearby.

5. Will the monitoring framework provide a clear indication of the on-going effectiveness of the strategy?

As mentioned above, we feel there is an important national role for the access strategy in demonstrating ways of getting rural residents to be more active in their daily lives. It would be useful if this aspect was considered during the monitoring of this strategy.

6. Ranger Services across the National Park are key partners in supporting the delivery of Active Cairngorms. Is the current provision of rangers best placed to help deliver the strategy

There are clear advantages in having a National Park ranger service, rather than relying on those rangers employed by organisations such as RSPB or NTS, or the private sector. These include the ability to deploy rangers in areas where they can best support the Park's activities and priorities, and the wider public interest. We welcome the ambition to establish a volunteer ranger service, with the hope that ranger jobs are created in due course.

We hope you will find this submission useful and would be happy to discuss any of these matters further.

Ramblers Scotland is the representative body for walkers in Scotland and recognised by **sportscotland** as a Scottish Governing Body of Sport. We have around 6,500 members in Scotland and 108,000 across Great Britain, and 55 local walking groups in Scotland run entirely by volunteers. We campaign to promote walking for health and pleasure, to safeguard and facilitate public access to land, and to protect the natural beauty of the countryside.

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