

The Mountains and People project and the funding of paths in our National Parks

Description

The Herald yesterday (8th June) carried a story that has now been recycled several times about the Mountains and People Project which is investing Â£6.1m in footpaths in our new National Parks. The new angle was hillwalkers are being asked to report footpath problems, far from a new idea but good stuff.

What was new was the quote from Roseanna Cunningham, the new Minister for the Environment, who said that no-one cares more deeply about conserving our landscape â??than those who walk our hills and countryside regularlyâ??. She is to be congratulated for saying this, but having said this I hope she will now ponder the logic of her predecessor, Aileen McLeod, to approve the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Parkâ??s camping bye-law proposals. These will of course these very same people from enjoying the landscape in what is the best way possible, by not just walking through it but by staying in the outdoors.

The story was also, as is often the case, as interesting for what was not said as for what was:

- Our National Parks were set up in part to improve infrastructure for visitors, such as paths, so why is Heritage Lottery Funding needed to do this? If National Parks are not funded sufficiently well to do this themselves, what hope for the rest of the country?
- The majority of the Heritage Lottery funding for the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park is going to Forestry Commission Scotland to fund pathwork on hills such as Ben Aâ??An and Ben Venue in the Trossachs and the Arrochar Alps. While FCS is making a financial contribution, far more money will be spent on FCS paths by the Mountains and People Project than what it has put in. Why does FCS not have the funds to do the jobs its needs to do? Is it misspending its resources, buying places like Rothiemurchus for Â£7.4m, or does it simply not have enough to achieve its objectives?
- Arising from this lack of public finance, are questions about the project itself? How will all the people who are to be trained in footpath work â?? and who were pictured in the paper â?? get jobs at the end of it? Is the project training yet more people who will end up without a job due to a lack of finance, austerity? Is there any point in getting hillwalkers to report problems if in three years time there is no-one left in the Park able to fix them?

Now, I intend no criticism here of the staff who have put this proposal together and obtained the funds. They are having to work in very difficult circumstances, where due to the prevailing neo-liberal ideology, proper funding is not available for mountain paths among a multitude of other things. So they have to scrape funding together and all credit to them for doing this. We kid ourselves though if we fail to consider and alert people to the wider implications.

So, the first thing that needs to be said is that we need far more investment in footpaths across Scotland and the Scottish Government needs to find ways to enable this to happen. Walking is accepted as the single most effective way of people remaining health and getting people walking more is a national priority. You would have thought therefore that investment in footpaths would be a political priority but its not. In this respect walking now lags behind cycling where there is now a national commitment to increase levels of investment (even though this is far from enough). Cycle funding though has benefitted our National Parks, for example the new cycle path between Drymen and Balmaha which is funded through Sustrans. In the footpath world though there is no pot of money and no mechanism to channel public funds, hence the need for the Mountains and People Project. I realise public finances are difficult but nationally believe we need to see a proportion of the roads budget, to increase year by year, spent on footpaths.

There are though also solutions at the National Park level and our National Parks could take a lead on this. While I know Board Members have bemoaned the lack of funds for footpath work at Board Meetings, none are prepared to speak out and instead allow their staff to issue congratulatory press releases which only tell a small part of the story. If Board Members are not prepared to criticise the Scottish Government, they could nevertheless put their own house in order and clearly state that there is not nearly enough funding going into footpaths and other visitor infrastructure and then lead by example. They have a solution to hand and that is through the introduction of a tourist tax in the National Park ([see previous post tourist taxes](#)).

If they did this now, there might just be enough money available to provide jobs when the money runs out in three years time to some of the people who have been trained through the Mountains and People project.

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