

Noise pollution, outdoor recreation and our National Parks

Description



A section of the footpath between Speybank and Kincaig with cycle path below right

The section of the Speyside Way between Kincaig and Speybank is a beautiful walk through oak and birch woodland, with a scattering of aspen, hazel and rowan. Though not far from the pinewoods of Glen Feshie, somehow the very occasional pine looks out of place. The strip of woodland along the river is regenerating and full of bird song. There are fine views down onto the Spey, where on Friday goosander were fishing, and out over to Glen Feshie and the Cairngorm plateau. The newer multi-use main path – the older path follows a more direct route above the river – has been well done, with sympathetic materials and is a credit to the Cairngorms National Park.

The recreational experience has changed, however, since the last time I was here, a year or so ago. The peace had gone. Instead, for much of the way, we were accompanied by the noise of traffic. What has changed is that the new section of dual carriageway between Kingussie and Aviemore has opened. I cannot recall hearing any traffic here previously though I do remember hearing the train – the railway track here runs even closer to the Spey and we did hear one pass. The volume was lower and the noise temporary.

I was quite surprised that the woodland did not deaden the noise of the traffic more but it is open, not dense. There are places where you drop down or behind moraine and out of the noise and with an easterly wind or other atmospheric conditions maybe the traffic would be out of earshot. This walk though is unlikely to be the same again until such time as the internal combustion engine gives way to electric power.

It brought home the impact of the new road on the residents of the higher part of Kincaig whose homes must now be blighted by this noise.

The politicians will argue that enabling thousands of people to access the Highlands more quickly – and some of the noise on Friday was created by people, like us, heading north to enjoy a holiday weekend – is vastly more important than the recreational experience at Speybank or local residents. And its quite true few people live here and we saw just a handful of people out walking in a couple of hours. Yet most of the tourists heading north are doing so for that recreational experience and the cumulative impact of the additional noise created through the whole of the Cairngorms National Park by the A9 dualling will be considerable.

A similar situation is faced with the A82 upgrade which is being planned along the north section of Loch Lomond. The noise levels of the existing road on the West Highland Way is already considerable – the loch acts as a sounding board – and can be heard from the summit of Ben Lomond. If the upgraded A82 follows the edge of the loch – as it does with the new section which replaced the traffic lights near Pulpit Rock – the noise will become even worse.

Both our National Parks should be helping to highlight the increased noise pollution which will inevitably result from the A9 and A82 upgrades and not just treat these road upgrades as another Scottish Government target which has to be met. Road noise impacts on what our National Parks are supposed to be all about – the ability of people to enjoy the natural environment. I hope our National Parks will push for more public debate on this issue nationally, based on the experience of the road upgrades in the last couple of years, and argue strongly that the roads are designed in a way that minimises noise. For the people who live along the line of the old A9 through Kincaig there is nothing to baffle the noise from the new section of road. While there are no easy solutions,

apart from electric cars – a major road is a major road – I am sure the design could be improved and undergrounding and tunnelling in places – particularly along Loch Lomond – would make a real difference.

Tunnelling at present has been ruled out by Transport Scotland on grounds of costs – but what price our National Parks? Public debate on noise pollution might persuade our government to make the investments necessary.

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