

The Ben Ledi path and the outdoor recreation failure in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park

Description



A path gone wrong. A section of the tourist route up Ben Ledi, August 2021, Loch Lubnaig behind

In January 2020 I wrote a post ([see here](#)) about the LLTNPA's consultation on "Active Park, Healthy People", parkspeak for what had been an Outdoor Recreation Plan, and said this about paths:

“Paths are crucial for outdoor recreation and – whether you agree with the spin or not – for the delivery of the LLTNPA’s stated ambitions. The “plan” refers to the work done by the Mountains for People project on paths over the last five years but says nothing about what will happen now that funding is coming to an end. The fact is that apart from funding for cycle paths from Sustrans, there is now NO core funding available either to create new paths or maintain existing ones. That probably partly explains why the Park’s Core Paths Plan was so lacking in ambition (see here) but leaves an enormous hole. So, why has the “plan” not addressed this? And what, for example, is Forestry and Land Scotland going to invest to make up the difference?”

The disappearing outdoor recreation plan

The last Outdoor Recreation Plan covered the years 2012-17 and, as Mary Jack pointed out on parkswatch (see here), was already well out of date by the time the consultation ended in January 2020. As one of the respondents, in early March 2020 I received an email say the final plan would be considered at the June Board meeting and not March as previously announced. That didn’t happen due to Covid.

At the September 2020 Board Meeting it was reported that the work was still on hold and the timeline was being revised :

2. Enhancing our visitor experience, volunteering, and active living opportunities		
2.1 We will continue to promote ways to get active in the outdoors.	Finalise our ‘Active Park, Healthy People’ plan	<u>Timeline being revis</u> consider COVID-19
	Progress key aspects of our Active Park, Healthy People plan such as developing new health projects.	New timeline and ta provisional target of

Extract from progress report on operational plan

Then, at the December 2020 Board Meeting, there was what appeared to be some good news:

2. Enhancing our visitor experience, volunteering, and active living opportunities			
2.1 We will continue to promote ways to get active in the outdoors.	Finalise our ‘Active Park, Healthy People’ plan	Work now restarting. <u>Timeline shifted to June 2021</u> so that COVID-19 considerations can be fully absorbed.	Postponed to 2021/22 due to COVID-19.
	Progress key aspects of our Active Park, Healthy People plan such as developing new health projects.	No capacity across partners due to COVID-19 to fully consider and develop new projects at this time.	Postponed to 2021/22 due to COVID-19.

However, just three months later in March 2021, it was reported that the plan would be deferred another nine months until March 2022, again due to Covid:

AOP Activity	AOP Deliverable	YTD Progress (Feb 2021)	Rating
2. Enhancing our visitor experience, volunteering, and active living opportunities			
2.1 We will continue to promote ways to get active in the outdoors.	Finalise our 'Active Park, Healthy People' plan	In light of ongoing COVID-19 impacts, proposal to <u>defer plan until March 2022 submission</u>	Postponed to 2021/22 due to COVID-19
	Progress key aspects of our Active Park, Healthy People plan such as developing new health projects.	No capacity across partners due to COVID-19 to fully consider and develop new projects at this time	Postponed to 2021/22 due to COVID-19

The latest deadline for the new plan is now five years after the last one expired, by which time the consultation will be well out of date! Clearly, the system of governance in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) is unfit for purpose.

Since the LLTNPA Board allowed their Chief Executive complete power to decide staffing matters, they have completely lost the ability to influence what the National Park Authority does and doesn't do on a daily basis, including whether any of their plans are delivered. No-one on the LLTNPA Board appears prepared to challenge their management team about why timescales constantly shift like this or the underlying reasons for this. My guess is that the explanation is that the LTNPA's Access Team does not have the capacity to do what is needed.

The consequences of these failures for the footpath network in the National Park and outdoor recreation are serious.

The case of the tourist path up Ben Ledi

Last month I went with some visitors for a walk up Ben Ledi. It was the fourth time I have been up that hill since 2016, when work was being done to re-align and upgrade the main path as part of the Mountains and the People Project ([see here](#)) funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund:

Ben Ledi (main)

MAP

PATH INFORMATION

IMAGE GALLERY

SUMMARY OF WORKS

Works on Ben Ledi were undertaken in the summer of 2016. The well used path had suffered for high footfall as well as areas of subsidence. Before path works could commence landowners, Forestry Commission Scotland, undertook harvesting operations to remove and replace Sitka Spruce plantations.

Contractor - Cairngorms Wilderness Contracts and McGowans Ltd

Total length of works - 1000m

Total cost of works - £ 500k

Work Description

Raised aggregate path with side ditches and stone drainage features, 66 m of stone pitching using locally sourced stone flown to site by helicopter.

Screenshot from Mountains and the People web page

Five years later, parts of that path work are disintegrating, as evidence by the top photo and those that follow:



Interpretation. It appears that initially people avoided the steps on the right because they were too high and chose instead to walk directly to the large flat boulder on the left, eroding the ground below which is now starting to gully. As the height required to step onto that boulder increased, people started avoiding them completely, eroding the ground on either side.

Part of the explanation for this path failure appears to lie in fundamental design flaws, particularly on the steeper sections. People generally don't enjoy walking on hard stone but it is well known in the path world and written into the Upland Path Standards ([see here](#)) that where the vertical height difference between steps is more than 15cms people will avoid them if they can. That appears to account for what has happened here and significant section of the new step work on the main Ben Ledi path is at risk of being left high and dry just five years after construction. That in itself should be enough for an LLTNPA Board visit and an inquiry into what has gone wrong.

The maintenance failure

Some of the problems originating from the design flaws could still have been prevented had there been follow-up work and regular maintenance. One of the ideas behind the Mountains and the People project, which was funded for five years, was to train up volunteers to keep the paths in good order. In 2019 Volunteers did some excellent work on the lower section of the Ben Ledi path that was not included in the Cairngorms Wilderness/McGowan's contract work ([see here](#)). However, the last

recorded volunteering projects appear to have been in October 2019 and since then not even the most basic maintenance work appears to have undertaken:



Exposed culvert with dislodged capping stone beyond. If it looks bad, it is bad!

The impact of feet – including crampons in winter! – on the exposed plastic culvert will shorten its life significantly but not even basic maintenance issues such as this are being addressed.

While the path up Ben Ledi from Stank Glen, which was built at the same time by the Mountains and the People Project, is generally in far better condition, it too has been neglected:



The former fence and stile at the top of the path work in Stank Glen with one wire, just visible, running across the path from the post.

I have photos from December 2018 showing the fence intact. With the erosion, the wire is now at just the right height for a child skipping downhill to garotte themselves. It would be almost impossible for anyone to see in the dark. The safety hazard is obvious and would have been picked up if anyone was maintaining this path. But having managed to get all the path work paid for by the lottery, Forest and Land Scotland should not have relied on volunteers to do the maintenance. Indeed the very first principle in the Upland Path standards published by NatureScot states:

“Pathwork will be carried out within a coherent management framework, including a commitment to long-term maintenance. It will integrate with other management objectives”

We need to ask why Forest and Land Scotland have abdicated their responsibilities to the extent that they are not even prepared to check if the paths are free from human created hazards? Tourist Income from the forest cabins below Stank Glen should have provided an easy means of paying for this but they have been outsourced to Forest Holidays who don't appear to invest anything back into the area. The wider question is why the LLTNPA has not held Forest and Land Scotland to account for these failures particularly when their Convener, James Stuart, is also paid to sit on the Scottish Forestry Strategic Advisory Group ([see here](#)).

So how bad is the situation with the two main paths up Ben Ledi?

It is important to put these problems and failures into perspective. Apart from the fence, the path up Stank Glen showed little obvious sign of deterioration since I had last walked it in December 2018 – nothing to cause me to stop and take photos!



December 2018

There are a number of explanations for this. While at a similar altitude to much of the main path up Ben Ledi, the Stank Glen route has less footfall, is far less steep and is surrounded by native woodland which reduces the amount of water flowing onto it. It is likely to require relatively little ongoing maintenance to remain in a good state.



There are similar sections along the main path which have held up well since construction and where the vegetation on either side has regenerated successfully.



But there are also slightly steeper sections where the aggregate surface has been washed away. According to the Upland Path standards, if properly designed this shouldn't happen. This has made the path unpleasant to walk on so people have taken to the verges and they are now starting to erode.



As the raised path has eroded, a new path has been created to the left of it. If this continues the edge of the ditch further to the left could start to collapse

Regular maintenance – a stitch in time – would prevent these problems becoming serious and undermining the £500k that was invested in creating the new path. Some damage to the new path needs to be fixed immediately:



The raised path should have shed water but is now starting to gully and water is being erected over this step eroding it further. How long until it collapses?

Other damage is less urgent. I was concerned about the abrasion on either side of this short section which is clearly a consequence of poor path design/construction:



Who would ever use the higher boulder on the middle left as a step? It blocks the path rather than encouraging people to walk up it.

But compared to the situation which I visited in December 2018, while the eroded area has spread slightly its not significantly worse:



Photo Dec 2018, showing signs of incipient path on left. The trampled vegetation on the right has now recovered but a new path has developed to the right of that.

What the photos show is that some of the paths that evolved around the steps are relatively robust and have yet, themselves, been subject to serious erosion.

The summit section of the main path

There is also some serious damage to the upper section of path which, as far as I am aware, was not included in the Mountains and the People Project, ie despite spending £500k this was not enough to repair the entire Ben Ledi path, only the middle section:



Upper section of the Ben Ledi path viewed from what I understand was the final stretch upgraded by the Mountains and the People project



Close up of first steep section showing remnants of former path work. The height of the first step has deterred walkers from accessing the steps above and resulted in the erosion of the ground on the right.

There had been earlier work done on the upper section of work but, without maintenance and further investment, it has gradually eroded away. Sections are now collapsing:



Note how the boulder in the foreground, which once formed a step, has been eroded out of the path.

What needs to happen

The photo above (I have more!) provides an illustration of what is likely to happen to the stepped sections of the Mountains and the People path unless the problems are addressed quickly. That requires Forest and Land Scotland, who own the land, to fulfil its obligations to maintain paths on the land it owns properly and to act to rectify the problems.

The Ben Ledi, path, however raises broader issues about how paths are being repaired and maintained in the National Park which also requires the LLTNP to act:

1) Improving path design. The design faults in the Ben Ledi path should have never have happened. Many people, over many years devoted considerable effort to working with SNH/NatureScot to develop Upland Path Standards, incorporating experience from the past, and these standards are still promoted by the Scottish Outdoor Access Network ([see here](#)). Part of the problem – and its not just Ben Ledi – is they are not being applied. Ironically, some of the best examples of the path standards being ignored are in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority – (see [here](#) for the Ben A'an path and I will cover another example soon) – which in its early days was very involved in developing them. The explanation for why this has happened partly comes down to lack of money but with that a lack of critical commentary about what is going on. We could do worse then re-invent the British Upland Footpath Awards, which produced critical evaluations of pathwork each year and kept everyone on their toes.

2) Creating a framework for path maintenance in the National Park. Much of the money invested by the Mountains and the People Project and earlier path programmes has been wasted because there is effectively no maintenance of the path network in the National Park. That project trained up a significant number of people to do pathwork but, without jobs to go to, most of the money appears also to have been wasted. The answer is that both Forest and Land Scotland and the LLTNPA need to set up their own permanent footpaths teams. It will take resources, but with the Scottish Government having in their agreement with the Greens signed up to spending 10% of the transport budget on active travel (which should include active tourism), there could never be a better time to create such teams and local jobs.

3) Investment in paths. Our upland paths are under pressure as never before due to the pandemic. That this would happen should have been obvious but if the LLTNPA needed evidence the National Trust for Scotland explained the impact on Ben Lomond almost a year ago ([see here](#)). This should have been an opportunity to call for more public investment in paths but instead the LLTNPA kept silent.

The LLTNPA then decided to delay their Outdoor Recreation Plan, which should have been the means by which they could articulate the level of investment required, a missed opportunity if ever there was one. Until that happens, the path network in the National Park will continue to deteriorate but I have my doubts that the LLTNPA is capable of delivering this under their current leadership who need to be held to account for their recreational failures.

Category

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Tags

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