

Mountaineering Council of Scotland



Mountaineering Council of Scotland Response to Forestry Commission Scotland Consultation into the Glen Croe Forest Design Plan



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Introduction

The Mountaineering Council of Scotland (MCofS) is the recognised representative organisation for hill walkers, climbers and ski-tourers who live in Scotland or who enjoy Scotland's mountains, with 11,400 members. The MCofS also acts for the 75,000 members of the BMC (British Mountaineering Council) on matters related to Landscape and Access in Scotland, and provides training and information to mountain users to promote safety, self-reliance and the enjoyment of our mountain environment.

The Mountaineering Council of Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) consultation into the Glen Croe Forest Design Plan.

Glen Croe – Mountaineering Context

The Arrochar Alps and Argyll Forest Park is an incredibly important area for all kinds of mountaineers. For hill walkers the area offers Munros (mountains over 3,000 feet), Corbetts (mountains from 2,500 to 3,000 feet) and lower level walks within the forest, including a section of coastal path alongside Loch Long. The area also offers a wide range of interest for climbers, with an abundance of winter ice climbs, summer rock climbs and a growing number of bouldering venues.

The proximity of the Arrochar Alps to Glasgow has made this a popular area with mountaineers for over a century and a half, and the historical significance of the area, and The Cobbler in particular, is highlighted in [this article](#) by Bob Smith MBE on the Arrochar, Tarbet and Ardlui Heritage website.

Glen Croe – Landscape Context

Glen Croe is an iconic part of Scotland's first national park and forms the dramatic entry point to the park on its western boundary. The management of the landscape in this area is therefore of great importance to visitors to the area. As the body representing the interests of those visitors who come to walk and climb in the park, the landscape management of Glen Croe is of considerable concern to the MCofS.

From the point of view of people's enjoyment of the area, whether it be when the mountain sides are viewed from high on the mountains or from the car parks and lay-bys, our main concerns are of the composition of the forests and the visual impact of the upper edge of the forests in particular. A more varied and mixed woodland would be more attractive than a monoculture of Sitka spruce and the avoidance of straight lines would help to give the upper edges of the forests a more natural look.

Many of the forest blocks in this area have upper edges that are particularly straight, so a simple way to improve the landscape would be to feather these edges by incorporating some random planting around the upper edges whilst leaving open spaces in other areas.

Looking to the longer term, Glen Croe sits between some of the fine Argyll Atlantic oakwoods and the Loch Lomond woods, and in terms of natural woodland, biodiversity and wildlife corridors it would benefit the landscape if the few areas of existing oak were helped to expand.

Hill Walking

The Glen Croe Forest District contains one Munro, Beinn Narnain, which is linked by a ridge to another Munro, Beinn Ime, whose summit is outwith the district. The district also contains two Corbetts, Ben Arthur (better known as The Cobbler) and The Brack, which is linked to another Corbett Ben Donich. Hill walkers who link these two Corbetts in one walk will normally make their ascent and descents within the district, albeit they will walk out of the district to visit Ben Donich.

Climbing

The rock and ice climbing in this area is described in the Scottish Mountaineering Club (SMC) guidebook to Arran, Arrochar and the Southern Highlands. The main climbing venues within the area are:

- A'Chrois (NN289077).
- Creag Tharsuinn (NN276073).
- Beinn Narnain – Spearhead Ridge (NN274066), Yawning Crag (NN273064) and Cruach nam Miseag (NN278064).
- The Cobbler (NN259058).
- Glen Croe Crag (NN256044).
- The Brack (NN245031).

These climbing areas are above the forest plantations, so the main issue in terms of the Forest Design Plan relates to the paths leading to the crags. In that respect the comments about paths and path management elsewhere in this response cover our views on the paths to the crags.

Bouldering

In addition to the climbing on the crags described above, there is also an active and growing bouldering scene in this area with activity centred around the Narnain boulders and Glen Croe boulders. Bouldering takes place without ropes and part of the challenge is working on difficult problems which may lead to frequent falls to the ground. Most serious boulderers now use padded crashmats to prevent or reduce the risk of injury from falls. The bouldering in this area is described in “The Stone

Country Guide to [Bouldering in Scotland](#)” edited by John Watson. See pages 110 to 119.

The Narnain boulders are beside the main path in the corrie below The Cobbler at NN272056, and therefore well above the treeline. The Glen Croe boulders are mostly below the treeline and spread out over six separate groups of boulders. The names and locations of these boulders are: on the north side of the A83 - Hideaway Boulder (NN258043), Supercrack Wall (NN258044), Beer Can and Cutting Room (NN254043), Woodwell Boulder (NN253044), and high on the mountain on the south side of the A83 - Kennedy Boulder (NN249033).



Some of the taller boulders in the forest would benefit from some sensitive forest harvesting, including cutting the tree stumps as low as possible so that boulder mats of varying thicknesses can at least cover stumps. It would also be appreciated if log litter in the vicinity of the boulders could be cleared after felling operations.

The MCoFS has received reports of drainage problems around the group of boulders including Beer Can boulder and this is something that climbers would appreciate if FCS could investigate.

Picture: Alan Cassidy bouldering in Glen Croe. This route is called 'Precious' and is a classic boulder problem in the area. Note the use of boulder mats.

Woodwell Boulder is just south of the forestry road at about NN252045 and is actually two steep walls or boulders embedded in the road, with gravel spoil down the sides. It would be appreciated by the climbers who visit this area on a regular basis if the trees could be cut back a little below the steep faces to allow access and light, and possibly some removal of gravel and spoil from beside the boulders.

Hidden Boulder is in the forestry at NN248046 and is a 6-metre high wall and very green due to the darkness. If a few trees could be cleared, it would reveal this excellent wall for bouldering.

The MCoFS can provide contact details for John Watson, who can explain in more detail the points mentioned in the previous four paragraphs.

Upland Path Management

The main issue for the MCoFS in this area is the management of mountain paths and the paths that are of greatest concern are the main paths onto The Cobbler and

Beinn Narnain. A great deal of work has been carried out on these paths in recent years and the path onto The Cobbler in particular appears to be holding up well.

The recent work on these paths does, however, appear to have pushed some of the issues further onto the mountains. For example, on reaching Bealach a Mhaim, heading either towards Beinn Ime or Beinn Narnain, the path reduces back to the original hill path which is getting increasingly eroded. The new path to the bealach has also led to a lot of shortcutting up Beinn Narnain which has now developed into a new trod from the path end and this will require ongoing monitoring to ensure that any intervention is made as quickly as possible in order to avoid the need for expensive repairs at a later stage.

Also, in poor visibility a number of hill walkers are tempted on their return from the summit of Beinn Narnain to cut the corner which puts them into craggy ground. The MCofS view is that it may be possible to carry out some very light touch work, high on the mountain, to cover up any desire lines that might be emerging in that direction. Also, the MCofS can help communicate the message to hill walkers to be aware of this potential danger on Beinn Narnain.

The MCofS would like to see more paths being created throughout the Arrochar Alps in order to provide more route choices. This would enable walkers to take more circular walks, which would help hill walkers to use different routes for ascent and descent, and also encourage the less confident to take lower-level circular walks. A better network of paths around The Cobbler could also include paths running past some of the popular bouldering areas.

The provision and promotion of more paths in the forests below The Cobbler and Beinn Narnain would offer people using the Cobbler car park a greater choice of low-level walking options. One particular path that could be used more is the old path on the south side of the Buttermilk Burn. This would form an ideal circular walk for those not properly equipped for the open mountainside.

The MCofS would like to see more access routes onto The Brack, Ben Donich, The Cobbler and A'Chrois, especially through the forest plantations. A new access path could form a shorter route to the Kennedy Boulder and The Brack from the requested new parking at NN251044 (see below). On the south side of the river, there is potential for a direct path to the higher forestry track at NN251040, where it could link with the current access route to The Brack. This would cut out a long approach from Ardgartan. Similarly, at present when descending the south west ridge of The Cobbler towards Ardgartan it can be very difficult to get through the forest while anyone trying to access Dubh Chnoc and A'Chrois from Coiregrogain to the north east is faced with a frustrating bash through forestry. The problem is that the traditional forest maintenance roads tend to contour the hills when walkers and climbers are wanting to ascend and descend through the forest.

In comparing Glen Croe with other popular recreational forests in Scotland, what is really noticeable is the relative lack of options in terms of access because of the nature of the forestry. The MCofS believes there should be a medium-term plan to remedy this.

There are two specific pieces of erosion the MCofS would like to highlight on the path onto The Brack. There is a short steep section of erosion above the treeline at NN250033 at a point where the path breaks out of a gully just before entering the hanging valley. Also, the path leaving the forest track at NN252039 is in need of repair.

Above and beyond all these suggestions, the overriding requirement in terms of upland path management, across the whole area, is a robust programme of ongoing maintenance of paths. FCS, SNH and other public agencies have invested considerable funds in the repair of paths in this area, so it is vital to protect that investment by making a commitment to scheduled visits to clear culverts, cross drains and shedding bars.

Safety

The main safety issue the MCofS would like to highlight in this area is that of thick forest plantations blocking a quick descent off the hill in darkness and poor or deteriorating weather. The south and west side of Glen Croe is particularly bad for this with the descent from The Brack and Ben Donich being blocked by continuous plantation. The MCofS would like to see the Forest Design Plan make a commitment to building in more access routes at regular intervals so that hill walkers have more choice of routes generally. This would have the additional benefit of helping walkers and climbers coming off the hills in poor weather or light to easily find a safe line of descent through the forest.

The other safety issue is of the less-experienced being tempted onto higher ground because there appears to be no other track to take. Whilst the MCofS is opposed to waymarked trails on the open mountain, we are supportive of marked trails on the lower ground and within forests. Indeed, this is something that FCS does very well across the country. We would therefore like to see more circular routes and promotion of circular walks, as we believe this would be a positive way of guiding less-experienced visitors onto more appropriate terrain. The area around the main path onto The Cobbler could be managed in this way, as could the area around the path onto Ben Donich from the Rest and Be Thankful car park.

If signage is to be placed in car parks to promote circular walks within the forests, then that would present the opportunity to communicate mountain safety messages on the same signs. Interpretative panels could be used to communicate mountain safety messages and promote the use of weather and avalanche forecasting services. The MCofS has a Mountain Safety Adviser that could advise FCS on the possible content of such panels.

Facilities

The Honeymoon Bridge parking area is used by hill walkers heading for The Brack and climbers heading for the Glen Croe boulders, however, a suggestion for new parking in this area would be to expand the parking spot at NN251044 on the north side of the road and by the start of a forestry road. There may be enough space at this location for three cars. This would be helpful, especially if linked with a new access path across the road leading up towards The Brack (see suggestion above).

A new access path could form a shorter route to the Kennedy Boulder and The Brack from the requested new parking at NN251044. Across the road on the south side of the river, a direct path uphill to the higher forestry track at NN251040, where it could link with the current access route to The Brack. This would cut out a long approach from Ardgartan.

Whilst not a facility as such, the MCofS would like to suggest that FCS work with other partners such as the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) and transport authorities to investigate the possibility of a summer mini-bus service from Tarbet to Ardgartan. There is a good bus and rail service to Tarbet, but walking to and from the Cobbler car park can add several miles to your day, and that can discourage people from visiting. The MCofS believes there would be demand for such a service and would encourage the organisations mentioned above to instigate a feasibility study.

Management of Glen Croe

From a mountaineering point of view it seems illogical to comment on the management of Beinn Narnain and The Cobbler without considering the equivalent management of Beinn Ime. Likewise, it is equally inconsistent to discuss The Brack without considering the management of Ben Donich. The MCofS therefore wishes to question how the Glen Croe Forest Design Plan fits into the wider management of the whole of the Arrochar Alps and Argyll Forest Park.

For instance, the MCofS would welcome a general reduction in the levels of grazing across the wider area in order to encourage biodiversity, including a scrub layer at the top of the forest plantations. This would not be possible in the Glen Croe Forest District alone, but would have to be implemented across a wider area. A significant reduction in grazing on the south western slopes of Beinn Luibhean would encourage regeneration on that side of the mountain, which in turn could help to stabilise the slopes that are currently prone to landslides. The only way to address these bigger issues is via a plan for a much wider area, so the MCofS would like to see FCS, LLTNPA, SNH and other bodies working together to formulate a plan for the whole of the Arrochar Alps.

The MCofS welcomes the conservation measures described in the minutes of the scoping meeting in terms of providing a buffer zone against grey squirrels in order to

protect the red squirrels, and to evaluate the potential for productive broadleaves and alternative conifers.

The MCofS wishes to have an ongoing dialogue with FCS and the LLTNPA over the management of this key mountain area. We would therefore be grateful if you could keep us informed about progress with the Forest Design Plan process and include us in any further consultations and decision making processes.

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