



Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland



SPRING REVIEW

APRIL 2022

The Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland (OATS) is a ground-breaking environmental charity. This is what we do:

ACCESS

OATS promotes sustainable access – developing, building and fixing upland and lowland paths, path networks, habitats and trailhead facilities, in popular, remote, and fragile places. We do this to support outdoors enthusiasts, land managers and local communities, and promote the health and wellbeing benefits of path use.



Contract team in action

WORKFORCE

As a Scottish Qualification Authority Approved Centre, OATS drives employment in building and developing path networks, training people in the skills they need for outdoor access and conservation work.



Trainees on The Mountains and The People project

VOLUNTEERS

OATS gives volunteers the chance to give something back to the places they love, promoting understanding and conservation of heritage and environment.








Volunteers on Meall a Bhuachaille

WORKING WITH PARTNERS

OATS is at the forefront of developing partnerships to finance conservation projects, collaborating with others to make Scotland's outdoor access network fit for the future, and bringing people together to learn how to make places that matter better for all.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS 2022

-  We are leading on the £1m Skye Iconic Sites Project to restore and enhance access to the Fairy Pools, Old Man of Storr and Quiraing
-  In the Cairngorms National Park, post-Covid, our Volunteer Maintenance and Adopt A Path schemes are springing back to life. In helping themselves and others, path-users can put something back into the trails they enjoy.
-  We are continuing to manage, upgrade and improve Skye's Fairy Pools car park and toilets
-  We have more innovative schemes to raise funds through car parking ready to go, as well as a range of path projects
-  We are planning a major push to encourage path users to help fund the paths they use, starting with an iconic Highland site

Read on for the full spring review.

Rebuilding OATS after the pandemic

CEO Dougie Baird

The Covid crisis has been a difficult time for OATS, as for much of the charity sector and for society as a whole. We hope we're through the worst of it and can look forward with optimism, and have started the process of rebuilding staff capacity within the trust.

Shona Irvine has hit the ground running since joining us as Activity Projects Manager in January. She is leading on the OATS volunteer projects, Adopt A Path and Volunteer Maintenance, with a key role in access projects for the Cairngorms.

Niki MacLean left at the turn of the year, and Willie Grant has joined OATS as the Fairy Pools Facility Manager, bringing lots of practical experience from the offshore industry. With financial assistance from HIE's Community-Led Tourism Infrastructure Fund via the Minginish Community Hall Association, a link path between the car park's top and bottom tiers has been built and the car park drainage has been improved. The cattle grids have also been dug out. An extra ticket machine will ease queuing at the busiest times.



Maintenance at the Fairy Pools car park

Murray Swapp is driving forward the Skye Iconic Sites Project, delivering just under £1m of infrastructure, habitat restoration and interpretive work on the island over three years.

New projects that are ready to build in the coming months include Beinn A'Ghlo car park, assisted by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), and the Deeside Way project from Braemar to Brig o' Dee, funded by CNPA and Aberdeenshire Council.

Other projects are at planning and fundraising stages, including Stac Pollaidh Car Park, Noss Head to Ackergillshore on the John O'Groats Trail, and a major survey of the Trail from Inverness to John O'Groats, in partnership with the Association of Northern Trails Scotland.



Site meeting for Deeside Way project



OATS are keen to work with hill-goers and mountaineering organisations to fund major renovations to the terribly eroded path on An Teallach in the north-west Highlands. The private landowner of one of Scotland's most iconic mountains gets no benefit from public access, so it is really up to those of us who care to provide a solution. We want this to be a pilot for mountain conservation in Scotland, where the people who get most from the hills put something back to conserve these special places for future generations.

As we start filling the gaps in our ranks and rebuilding the Covid-sized hole in our reserves, the value of the outdoors in Scotland has never been more obvious. The need for the work we do has never been clearer, so I have been working with the OATS Board over the winter to ensure we have the finance to help us look to the future. We want to be able to embrace the opportunities that are emerging to help make Scotland's outdoors more sustainable, and engage with those who care for it.



Path survey on An Teallach

The Trust has moved office from Perth to Bridge of Allan and we are currently recruiting a new Administrator to be based there, having been without one for the second half of the Covid crisis.



The John O' Groats Trail

Whether it's donating to a path appeal, reporting on the condition of our paths, or getting our hands dirty with volunteer path work, there's a role there for everyone, and so much satisfaction can be taken from knowing we are giving something back.

SISP - One Year On

Project Manager Murray Swapp reports on the progress of the Skye Iconic Sites Project



The Skye Iconic Sites Project (SISP) is making major improvements at three of Skye's busiest tourist destinations.

Currently the biggest project OATS is managing, SISP is addressing the lack of tourist infrastructure and interpretation at the Old Man of Storr, the Quiraing and the Fairy Pools, and improving the visitor experience for a wider range of people.

The work includes developing new paths, bridges, and viewpoints, and restoring existing paths and surrounding habitat damaged by the huge increase in visitors in recent years. Information points and signage will provide a programme of coordinated interpretation.

The foundations for this two-year project were laid in April 2021 when contracts were finalised, professionals were hired and administration systems were set up. A year on, a great deal has been achieved.

Interpretation programme update

The first task for the interpretation consultants hired by SISP was to produce three reports: a review of current interpretation on the Isle of Skye; an audience appraisal for the three sites; and a proposal for imaginative ways to use Gaelic in the interpretation. Results from the reports, and community consultations, formed the backbone of the project's coordinated interpretation plan.

The review of the island's current interpretation studied the condition of information panels and visitor signage at tourist destinations on Skye, including the detail, design and themes conveyed. It also noted information gaps and potential space for new themes to achieve a long-term coordinated approach to interpretation throughout the island.

Getting Gaelic across to visitors was an essential element of the brief. After meeting Gaelic organisations, side-by-side Gaelic translation was rejected. To give users an understanding and appreciation of the language it was recommended that the panels should convey the meaning of Gaelic names and phrases in terms of place, landscape, songs and poetry, and flora and fauna.

The consultants carried out a survey of visitors at the three sites to gather feedback on current information and themes. Community consultations were also conducted with the Minginish and Staffin communities, and online questionnaires were distributed more widely, to find what content, themes and designs people wanted on information panels. The consultations were also an opportunity to gauge public feedback on the initial plans.



Interpretation consultation with pupils at Carbost Primary School

Habitat restoration update

After hiring a habitat restoration contractor in August 2021, OATS trialled seed gathering and collection techniques on the Old Man of Storr. It was important to collect species-rich seed direct from this Site of Special Scientific Interest, including from plants such as alpine lady's mantle and heath bedstraw. Staff trialled the scythe, strimmer and clippers to cut grasses, and a leaf collector to pick up the seeds. The combination of strimmer on low revs and leaf collector was the most efficient for output and speed. The seed was then spread on a trial area damaged by visitor footfall.



Trialling seed collection at the Old Man of Storr

The team also experimented with covering the seed with geo jute (hessian netting) pinned and weighed down with rocks. The geo jute covers and stabilises the surface area and offers the seedlings greater shelter to grow. The future use of geo jute plus habitat restoration signage will create an obvious barrier for people.

Other habitat restoration works proposed at the Old Man of Storr involve turfing some of the damaged ground, and turf-lining some of the damaging and erosive drainage features created by footfall erosion.

To reduce overgrazing from sheep, 1.3 kilometres of fencing is also being installed on the site, protecting the restored land and the wider species-rich area.

The focus for habitat restoration moved to the Quiraing in January and February 2022 when quotes were sought for a contractor. Large-scale turfing work was the preferred option here in order to quickly repair the extensive damage.

OATS found a turf donor site, an old quarry with the same grass type as the restoration area, half a mile from the site car park. Permission to use the turf was granted by the Crofter's Grazing Committee. The 300-millimetre deep turfs were cut and taken from the donor site to the car park, with power barrows moving it to the restoration site.

The turfs were then butted up and tamped in. The results will be closely monitored.



Habitat restoration work at the Quiraing

OATS will now reseed both the 280 sq m donor site and some smaller bare peaty areas more suited to reseeding, at the visitor site. Under management from OATS and NatureScot, a new ecological clerk of works will oversee seed collecting and planting, turfing, and fencing works across all three sites while assisting in monitoring the sites from now until autumn 2022.

Path building and renovation

In October 2021 OATS put out a tender for a Clerk of Works to oversee path-building at both the Quiraing and the Fairy Pools.

Now that all three locations included in SISP have fit-for-purpose car parks from which people can easily access the paths, the focus is set firmly on making the paths more accessible to more people. The idea is to provide easier access for the young, the elderly and the disabled, by creating smoother and all-ability surfaces where possible.

Between November and December 2021, 300 metres of new and upgraded paths, two metres wide, were constructed at the Quiraing. This included taking out old and uneven stone path features and replacing them with cambered aggregate paths. Two new viewpoints, and 50 metres of all-abilities path to one of the viewpoints, were also created.



Path construction at the Quiraing

What's next

With the three reports delivered, the interpretation plan is being finalised. The next step for the interpretation consultants will be to submit planning applications to Highland Council for information panels at the three sites. Work on this area of the project will continue until March 2023.

Work on two new bridges on the Fairy Pools access path has just begun. These will make it easier for the less confident and less able to cross the burns, particularly in high water. The new bridges should be completed by the end of May, in time for the busiest months of the tourist season.

The main path-building work at the Fairy Pools will start at the end of October. Cross-drain features, seen as trip hazards by some, will be replaced by plastic pipe culverts, so the 2km path can be upgraded to a smoother aggregate surface. In addition, new paths will be created at viewpoint sites coming off the main path. The final piece of path work will be 230m of stone pitching at the start of the path.

Vehicle monitoring to improve visitor experience

Skye's destination management organisation Skye Connect is working with Edinburgh University to develop a visitor management system for Skye based on real-time data collected from vehicle sensors and people counters. The aim will be to help visitors choose where to visit at busy times, with dynamic roadside message signs (DMS), and/or through an app. Through SISP, OATS has bought two people-counters and will be buying a vehicle sensor for the Glenbrittle road to the Fairy Pools Car Park. This is as a contribution to the wider Skye Connect/Edinburgh University project which, helped by RPID and Highland Council, will buy five more vehicle sensors and five people counters for Skye.

Project funding overview

SISP has a total budget of just under £1 million. It received £650,516 from the Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund, led by NatureScot and part-funded through the European Regional Development Fund. Additional partnership funding came from OATS (£98,793), Scottish Government Rural Payments Inspections Division (£150,000), the Minginish Community Hall Association (£20,000), and Highland Council (£10,000).

Shona shines for OATS

An update from Activity Project Manager Shona Irvine

I started working with OATS as activity projects manager on January 5 2022. It's been four months now: where has the time gone?!

The first few weeks were a steep learning curve, spent discovering the vast array of projects OATS is involved in and has worked on previously. I picked up on several projects developed during The Mountains and The People project (TMTP) and had a lot of reconnecting to do.

In January a key task was updating databases of volunteers for the two Scottish Mountaineering Trust projects I manage. They are Adopt A Path (AAP), which allows those passionate about the mountains to become volunteer custodians of paths, and Path Maintenance Volunteering. The majority were thankfully keen to continue involvement. I have since created a Facebook group for them to build a closer community.

I also spent time meeting and reconnecting OATS with partner organisations including the two national parks, Cairngorm Mountain, and Rothiemurchus estate.

AAP has been in hibernation since the end of TMTP, and wasn't helped by Covid. The website, which informs users about the scheme and allows Volunteer Adopters to report path issues, had a backlog of submitted path problems to sort out. After my website audit our tech guru is now improving the user experience and brand identity.

The current Adopters were delighted to hear AAP was restarting. In March I ran two very successful refresher days – helped by sunshine! We ran through the survey system and how to use the website and report problems. The days



Adopt A Path volunteers at Samson's Stone

also let me meet volunteers and let them meet one another, some for the first time since initial training five years ago. In April I am arranging training for new AAP Volunteer Adopters, talking them through the process, and practising the survey method on a hill walk.

AAP is an excellent project with definite prospects for development throughout Scotland. It's great to get it running again.

Since October 2020 Path Maintenance Volunteering has been substantially reduced as a result of Covid restrictions. I now have

a small list of volunteer dates for path repairs in April and May, with other dates coming soon. There was a good response to these dates on our social media channels. It's great to know there is so much enthusiasm out there. Although the first few dates are in the Cairngorms National Park

I hope to schedule days in other areas by the end of the summer.



Volunteers carry out path repairs

After increased footfall on many paths in recent years there is lots to catch up on, and much of the maintenance will be discovering what state paths are in and doing minor repairs.

I've overseen path repairs and signage on the Speyside Way, with resurfacing works at Insh, and liaised with stakeholders at Drumguish. Both sections are now complete. I have arranged an engineer to inspect another difficult section of the path and look forward to getting the work there under way. Hopefully I will be able to cycle up it myself very soon!



Path resurfacing works on the Speyside Way

Work on building a new section of path through difficult ground is starting as part of a bigger project to extend the Deeside Way from Ballater to Braemar. This will be an interesting project!

I have boosted our social media presence, as I am keen to keep followers up to speed with projects and to connect with a wider audience.

Many thanks to our supporters

Thank you to all who support our work. OATS would be unable to carry out the level or standard of work it does without financial support from a wide range of organisations: public bodies, NGOs, private companies and private individuals.



Eòrpa agus Alba

Maoin Leasachaidh Roinnean na h-Eòrpa
A' tasgadh ann an Àm ri teachd Gleusta, Seasmhach is In-ghabhail





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