

**Priorities for the Year Ahead - Synopsis of Presentation by Murray Ferguson,
Head of Visitor Services Group**

“A bit about Murray”

An Aberdeen Geography graduate who later studied Rural Resources Planning in Aberdeen and Business Administration with the Open University. Worked for SNH (13 years) in a variety of roles (e.g. at headquarters, as an Area Officer and on National Nature Reserves). Most recently worked on the Cairngorms, coordinating SNH's work that led to the establishment of the Park. Also worked overseas for two and half years in development and environmental projects amongst rural poor in South America (Bolivia). And worked as a ranger with NGOs in few different parts of Scotland. Grew up in Banchory on Deeside and spent a lot of time in NE Scotland. Now lives in Inverness. Has a strong personal interest in everything to do with having fun in the outdoors.

Key Priorities in year ahead

1. Building and developing the team – the team of staff who'll form the Visitor Services and Recreation Group

Three new staff will start in next six weeks and a key priority will be induction, familiarisation, training, building relations with partner organisations and local communities. It is already clear that we need to work very closely with colleagues in different Groups in the NPA. But we also need to work as part of wider teams beyond the organisation - e.g. with ranger services. We need to keep under review that staff resources are adequate for the tasks ahead.

2. Taking on responsibilities under the Land Reform Legislation

a) Establishment of the Local Access Forum

We need to have widespread discussion with partners and interested parties through workshops and then establishment of LAF before the end of calendar year. Then we will need to invest considerable staff time getting the Forum up and running effectively and working well with the Board

b) Core Path Plans

We have three years available. There is a big opportunity to link work on Core Paths with an emerging Community Development strategy by getting communities to identify the local paths that they would like to see in place. There is already enthusiasm at community level but frustration too at difficulty in putting paths in place and finding funds to maintain them. NPA can play a strong enabling role here.

3. Considering the future of the access delivery initiatives

Access delivery initiatives have been developed in each local authority, e.g. the Upper Deeside Access Trust (UDAT) and Eastern Cairngorms Access Project (ECAP); Moray Access Strategy and the Highland Access Project. They have been very successful at pulling in additional funding and delivery at local level (e.g. ECAP is worth £2.4 million over three years). But there are big issues for the NPA such as the patchy coverage of these initiatives and gaps in delivery (e.g. Strathdon). They are all coming to significant break points soon (Highland Access Strategy ends this autumn and UDAT and ECAP in September 2006). One way to manage this would be to work with partners on the preparation of an Outdoor Access Strategy for the Cairngorms.

4. Integration of the Ranger services

The Ranger Services Working Group has now met for first time and Visitor Services Officer is to start in few weeks time. There are an exceedingly complex set of arrangements at present with at least 14 ranger services, a variety of employers (including community groups, charitable trusts, NGOs, local authorities and public agencies) and a range of funding partners, of which SNH is the most significant.

There are various pieces of the jigsaw to assemble before we can start to move forward. Any review should focus on the needs of the National Park generally and the National Park Authority. The current system has many strengths – local diversity, cost effective for public sector, close to land managers, etc. But we need to be aware of disadvantages too – e.g. lack of visible NPA presence on the ground, cumbersome and bureaucratic management and liaison arrangements, etc. There are particular issues in Angus Glens Ranger Service which we need to address soon as the funding is due to run out shortly. In the meantime priority will be to focus on communication, getting ready for access legislation and raising their profile with visitors.

5. Providing Visitor Information to meet the needs of the Park

Visitors are not just from outside the Park but include locals too. We are all visitors to parts of the Park at some time. The visitor experience starts with the expectations of the visit, the visit itself and, most importantly, what they remember afterwards. We need to:

- a) improve the information we and others have about visitors:
 - National Park Visitor Survey is well under way - its not the numbers but the information about aspirations and the perceptions that count most
 - We need be much better at collecting, storing and using information about visitors and their needs and aspirations for the Park. And then harnessing that information to drive management improvements. We need to improve lines of communication so that we all know what is going on.
- b) improve the information that we and others make available for visitors:
 - There is already much good practice in the area. We don't want to standardise and stifle. So lets leave the best and improve the rest.

Appendix 3
To Minutes of Board Meeting of 12/03/04

- But visitor information also needs to be put in Cairngorms frame and the gaps in provision need to be filled (e.g. how to find Ranger Services if you want them)
- Sam Ham is likely to return to help with our interpretation strategy in the autumn
- Overall I think we need more of a visible presence that visitors are in a National Park and that it an area that is valued and which is being cared for.

Murray Ferguson
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