

MEDIA RELEASE

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For immediate release

The path to saving Scottish hills after post-lockdown surge of visitors

- **National Trust for Scotland asks for public help to reverse damage to footpaths**
- **Damage to routes described as ‘heartbreaking’**

A massive increase in visitors to Scotland’s hills has caused damage to footpaths on a scale never seen before, according to conservation charity the National Trust for Scotland. The most popular routes have seen a doubling of numbers and rapid erosion is at risk of causing irreparable damage.

Maintenance teams who look after the Trust’s 270 miles of paths have seen decades of work combatting weather erosion reversed as paths have widened, new routes have been trodden and delicate vegetation destroyed. The surge in visitor numbers began with the easing of full lockdown and the organisation is asking for the public’s help in preventing further damage.

Particular damage is being seen at Ben Lomond and Ben Lawers, both owned and looked after by the charity. Ben Lomond usually sustains 45-60 thousand walkers for the whole year but by mid-October was already registering 70 thousand. At peak times, post-lockdown numbers on Ben Lomond are showing to be twice those of 2019.

At Ben Lawers, since lockdown eased, the recording devices on the mountain are showing that monthly figures are more than double those seen in 2019. Around 30 thousand people use the routes on Ben Lawers each year and 2020 is expected to record a total figure of double that number.

Helen Cole is the National Trust for Scotland Property Manager at Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve. She said: “It’s wonderful seeing so many walkers and runners enjoying the hills, especially people who haven’t experienced this incredible place before. Ben Lawers is quite easy to get to from most parts of Scotland and when you’re at the car park, you’re already a third of the way to the top so we’re very popular!

“It’s heartbreaking though, seeing accidental damage being done. People don’t know they’re doing it but something as simple as walking off the path can be quite a big problem if it’s done in the numbers that we’ve had recently. Social distancing has got a major part to play too, as people try and avoid getting too close to others.

“I’ve been working on footpaths at Ben Lawers for 30 years and I’ve never seen the damage quite as rapid as this. We’ve got some of the rarest mountain plants in Britain here and we’ve spent decades and hundreds of thousands of pounds balancing our conservation work with public access but what’s happened in the last few months has put our work back by years.

“The Trust’s footpath team has been working exceptionally hard to keep up but we’re already behind because of lockdown and furlough.

“Visitors can help at Ben Lawers, and all around the path network, by staying on the paths as much as they can. Avoid making your own routes where possible and take your time.

“If you meet someone coming the other way and have to step off the path, please remember to get back on it as soon as you can afterwards. The paths can be rocky, but are robust, and while the verges around them can be softer they get muddy and boggy very quickly which is the start of the erosion process.”

Groups should try and walk single file along the paths especially on narrow sections and the person in front of you isn’t necessarily taking the right route, so be aware of your surroundings.

Metal-tipped walking poles can damage the ground and ones with rubber ends cause less harm. Definitely take your litter home as even biodegradable things like banana skins and orange peel can cause damage to the delicate ecosystems.

The Trust’s biggest piece of advice though is to take your time and enjoy the experience.

-ENDS-

IMAGES: Attached free-use images show Helen Cole, National Trust for Scotland Property Manager at Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve, one of the worst affected sites. Maintenance teams who look after the Trust’s 270 miles of paths have seen decades of work combatting weather erosion reversed as paths have widened, new routes have been trodden and delicate vegetation destroyed.

Images of Helen Cole at Ben Lawers can be found at <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/167uC4> or <https://we.tl/t-3oolM13ggX>

Images of the the NTS footpath team at work can be found at <https://we.tl/t-8tCqR1hFKX>

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Editor’s Notes:

About the National Trust for Scotland

The National Trust for Scotland is the charity that celebrates and protects Scotland's heritage. It relies on the support of its members and donors to carry out its important work of caring for the natural and built heritage of Scotland for everyone to enjoy.

From coastlines to castles, art to architecture, wildlife to wildernesses, the National Trust for Scotland exists to protect the national and natural treasures we all love. To plan your visit today, enter your postcode at www.nts.org.uk.

We would be grateful if, when referring to the National Trust for Scotland that our name is not shortened to 'the National Trust'. We are an independent organisation, separate from the National Trust. The National Trust for Scotland is commonly shortened to NTS or 'the Trust'.

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