



COMMISSIONED REPORT

Commissioned Report No.266

Health Walks on Scotland's National Nature Reserves (NNRs)

(ROAME No. R06AA604)

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This report should be quoted as:

*MNT Associates. (2007). Health Walks on Scotland's National Nature Reserves (NNRs).
Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report No.266 (ROAME No. R06AA604).*

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Report No. 266 (ROAME No. R06AA604).

Contractor: MNT Associates

Year of publication: 2007

Background

Health walking groups involve people who want to undertake a regular brisk walk to improve their health. They can include people from GP referrals or neighbours and friends who all share a common goal – to improve their health. They meet all over the country to improve their members' health in a supportive, friendly environment. They encourage people to explore their local areas whilst being physically active. There is at least one group per local authority and each group can include anything from 5-50 members. Prior to this study, no groups to SNH's knowledge, regularly used NNRs for their walks.

This study sought to evaluate the NNR experience for health walking groups by inviting them to participate in a pilot walk at each NNR. Their feedback and ideas were sought on ways to enhance existing facilities for this audience.

Main findings

Just under half of the participating groups had already walked on an NNR. The feedback clearly shows that the NNR walk experience was much more positive than the expectations of many walkers who had not previously walked an NNR route. All enjoyed their NNR experience. Many of the groups mentioned the positive effects their walks had on their mental and spiritual health.

NNR Suitability for Health Walks

- Understanding who health walkers are is fundamental to matching them to potential NNR walks.
- Nearly all the NNRs have poor public transport links and required bespoke transport arrangements to be made. This proves quite an obstacle to health walk groups using some NNRs.

- This study undertook health walks with groups from across the spectrum – beginner through to experienced walk groups. The report highlights which NNRs are suitable for the different ability levels of health walk groups, and identifies those that are less suitable on grounds of either the level of physical challenge, facilities available or the distance to travel and transport links.

Promotion

- SNH needs to market suitable NNRs to walk leaders and more experienced groups as well as independent health walkers.
- Very few NNR maps, leaflets and websites currently provide adequate information for health walk groups. Health walkers are interested in details of the physical challenge along the routes as well as the distance e.g. steepness, steps, rest places etc. Promotion of walks in an NNR area should not differentiate between routes inside and outside the NNR boundary. Groups also require specific details on accessibility, seasonality, weather impacts and opening hours, together with nearest available facilities.

Joint Working

- The findings highlight the importance of working more closely with Paths to Health and their local co-ordinators in design and delivery of promotion.

Physical Infrastructure

- Specifications for physical infrastructure are suggested as a possible standard for NNR routes being promoted as health walks. They are rather less than full specification all-ability trails, but sufficiently rigorous to avoid disenfranchising this important potential client group.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Background

- 1.1 Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) commissioned this study to introduce health walking groups to '**spotlight**' National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and other NNRs with suitable facilities. The process invited participants' views on the reserves' facilities and their ideas for marketing the reserves to similar groups.
- 1.2 Health walking groups meet all over the country to improve their members' health in a supportive, friendly environment. They encourage people to explore their local areas whilst being physically active. There is at least one group per local authority and each group can include anything from 5-50 members. This study seeks to evaluate the NNR experience for health walking groups and where possible, use their feedback and ideas.

Spotlight NNRs

- 1.3 The spotlight NNRs already provide the highest quality of visitor experience across SNH's NNR suite. There are 16 spotlight reserves, 12 of which have health walk groups relatively nearby. They are:-
 - Abernethy
 - Beinn Eighe
 - Ben Lawers
 - Caerlaverock
 - Flanders Moss
 - Forvie
 - Glen Affric
 - Knockan Crag
 - Loch Leven (includes Vane Farm with RSPB)
 - Loch Lomond
 - St Abbs Head
 - Tentsmuir

Non-spotlight NNRs

- 1.4 There are several non-spotlight NNRs which have suitable facilities and are located near health walking groups. SNH requested them to be included in this study. They are:-
 - Blawhorn Moss
 - Cairnmore of Fleet
 - Craigellachie
 - Clyde Valley Woodlands
 - Glen Tanar
 - Kirkconnell Flow
 - Loch Fleet
 - Muir of Dinnet
 - St Cyrus
 - Insh Marshes

**Spotlight NNRs are those which meet an additional series of advanced standards over and above the standards set for all NNRs. They are mainly concerned with enhanced provision for visitors but also cover learning opportunities and involving the local community and volunteers.*

2 THE STUDY OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF RESEARCH

2.1 The aims of the study were to:

- Facilitate a programme of visits to at least 22 NNRs by local health walking groups;
- Elicit and record the impressions of the members of these groups;
- Gain the views of the group members on existing and proposed facilities at each site;
- Help SNH inform their marketing and promotion approaches in future, and
- Help SNH start an informal marketing process to continue after the events.

2.2 The specific objectives were to:

- Engage with each NNR manager and staff of partner organisations who manage some of our NNRs, for example Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), National Trust of Scotland (NTS), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT);
- Engage and involve at least 22 health walking groups;
- Plan and arrange suitable trips, ideally at least one per site;
- Deliver alternative interaction to gain audience input if a group does not wish to visit an NNR;
- Develop a standard feedback mechanism for all participating walk groups;
- Facilitate the implementation of NNR trips;
- Gain participants' views on NNR walks;
- Collate and distil feedback and,
- Deliver an overview report.

3 METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

- 3.1 The study took place between March and October 2007. A team of five consultants who have experience of health walking and natural heritage issues in Scotland, and live in reasonable proximity to the sites, carried out the work led by MNT Associates.
- 3.2 The key stages followed were:-
- A list of contacts for the NNRs and for local health walk groups was drawn up in liaison with SNH staff, other NNR-managing organisations, and Paths to Health (Paths to Health). A combination of personal communication, telephone and e-mail exchange was used, given the geographical spread of the sites.
 - SNH's NNR website and several other websites were used to gain an understanding of the terrain and opportunities for health walks at each of the reserves.
 - Liaison with health walk group organisers established the type of trip to the nearest NNR that would accommodate all members' needs.
 - Discussion was held with reserve managers or nominated officers on any opportunities or issues related to the NNR.
 - A health walk trip was arranged to as many of the NNRs as possible.
 - The walks adhered to all the usual health and safety protocols, including use of the standard Paths to Health risk assessment protocol.
 - Focus groups with group members were conducted as open conversation, guided by a standard checklist of agreed key questions. They appear in the individual site reports for each focus group included at Appendix 1.
- 3.3 The majority of walks did not involve any additional structure or guiding than is normally provided. Where possible, the NNR walk was part of the health walk groups' normal schedule of walks and the usual method of transport was used to reach the sites e.g. car share, minibus etc.

Conducting the Study Walks

- 3.4 In total, 20 NNRs were visited by a health walk or other group. Two of the NNRs (Glen Tanar and Loch Fleet) hosted two walks each to different parts of the reserves, therefore 22 walks were undertaken during the study.

Inviting Health Walk Groups to Experience a National Nature Reserve Walk

- 3.5 The following 'rule of thumb' was used (in preference order one to five) to select potential participant groups, as not all NNRs have an active health walk group in very close proximity:-
1. Ideally the nearest "official" health walk group within the local community;
 2. Interested and willing volunteers from the local community who are not part of a health walk group. If there was not a walk group within the nearest community, it was felt best to find other local people to take part rather than bussing them from another area;
 3. An "official" existing health walk group from a "nearby" community;
 4. A small group comprising health walk leaders and,
 5. One health walker and someone from the reserve.

Declined Invitation

- 3.6 Only one of the invited health walk groups, Castle Douglas group “Stewartry Walking for Health”, did not wish to visit an NNR. The group agreed to meet for a discussion after one of their regular local walks. The focus group report is given in Appendix 1.
- 3.7 This group had declined to do a walk on an NNR, preferring local routes. Transport was perceived as the major barrier, as several members don’t drive and arranging group transport was seen as onerous due to uncertainty of numbers, and uncertainty of what to expect on a reserve. Generally the group prefers to take short local walks from Castle Douglas, and there is no particular interest in the opportunities presented by visiting an NNR.
- 3.8 There was quite a lot of uncertainty within the Castle Douglas group about what to expect at an NNR, with a concern that walking options would be too difficult. There was little interest in booking transport or undertaking prolonged journeys to NNRs (> ½ hr). This group have had difficulty in recruiting and retaining members who fit the target group (most members are retired and fairly healthy) and trips to NNRs are perceived as even more off-putting for the recruitment of the target group.

Risk Assessment

- 3.9 Ideally, in most cases, the risk assessments were undertaken in advance by the usual group member. In a handful of cases (six) these were undertaken by the consultant or the local ranger. Copies of all risk assessments have been submitted to SNH. A specimen risk assessment is given in Appendix 2.

National Nature Reserves Where Walks Were Not Undertaken

- 3.10 There were three NNRs on which health walks were not undertaken during the study, for reasons summarised below.

Flanders Moss

- 3.11 The walk leader concluded that the route was not suitable for her group, having made a site visit to undertake the risk assessment. The reason was that the walk is only just over one mile in length so would not present much of a challenge but would be of more interest to botanists than health walkers. There are no facilities other than the car park.

Kirkconnell Flow

- 3.12 A visit by the consultant to assess the suitability of Kirkconnell Flow NNR for a health walk concluded that the "Floating Road" path is very uneven with significant gaps between logs and lots of loose branches on the path surface. This path is completely unsuitable for a health walk group. In addition, the "Short Path" route presents a number of hazards including uneven path surface, narrow path and over-hanging vegetation, making it difficult for health walk groups. The walk takes only 20 - 30 minutes to complete, and is therefore unsuitable for the purposes of a health walking group seeking around 60 minute’s exercise.

Tentsmuir (see Appendix 1, for fuller report on paths and contacts)

- 3.13 It is disappointing that a walk could not be arranged at Tentsmuir, as the site appears to have excellent potential for Paths to Health walking schemes. Currently there are no Paths to Health programmes operating in this area. The former Paths to Health officer confirmed that the St Andrews and Cupar health walk programmes are closed.

The Paths to Health current focus within Fife is to develop their health walks programme on the south side, in areas of deprivation.

- 3.14 No response was received from the local co-ordinator (Bums Off Seats programme for Fife) or the administrative contact. The Perth & Kinross Stride for Life group has walked at Tentsmuir before (August 2006), but when approached about doing so again, the group was not willing to travel so far and already had a fully committed programme. However, with a recent appointment of a Forestry Commission recreation ranger, who is busy developing trail options on site and has experience of leading health walk groups, there is potential for future support.

Changed routes

- 3.15 One walk was re-located to another near-by route. Cleghorn was the walk that SNH had originally suggested in the Clyde Valley Woodlands, however, the "Walk a little - Live a lot" co-ordinator regarded this as an unsuitable option after having completed a risk assessment. The path was felt to be too steep and narrow with a steep drop at the edge in parts, and very muddy in wet weather. An alternative route was walked at Falls of Clyde, also in Clyde Valley Woodlands (see Appendix 1 for full feedback).

4 FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK

- 4.1 By their nature, the health walk groups and the NNRs are idiosyncratic, resulting in much of the feedback being site or group specific. Therefore, the feedback relating to each NNR walk undertaken is given in Appendix 1, while general issues arising are collectively summarised in this section.
- 4.2 The group feedback may have been influenced by the weather on the day of the walk, and this was acknowledged by some of the groups. The level of experience and ability of the group will also have a bearing on the views of a group. Over the 22 walks, there was a large variation in the stage and type of programme followed by the health walk groups. This directly affects a group's needs and aspirations. Where a group was clearly more able and experienced, they were asked to think about the suitability of the route for a new, less able group.

Knowledge of National Nature Reserves and information availability

- 4.3 Key findings relating to groups' prior knowledge of an NNR site were:-
- Only two groups out of the 22 groups (excluding their walk leaders) had not heard of NNRs at all. In all other groups the majority of walkers were aware of NNRs.
 - Knowledge of the specific NNR visited was more varied. In 10 of the groups everyone knew of the specific NNR – but these groups had all done previous health walks at the NNR site. It is interesting that nearly half the participating groups had already walked at the NNR as a group prior to the study.
 - A further six groups were aware of the area but not its NNR status. There was some confusion with National Scenic Areas, Scottish Wildlife Trust reserves or similar. In the remainder of the groups, few people knew of the existence of the area in which they walked.
 - In only four of the 22 groups had no-one ever visited the NNR previously. Participants in about a third of the groups had visited independently with friends or family.
 - Reasons given for not visiting included:
 - didn't know about the site or the routes;
 - perceived as too far or too difficult;
 - other options are available closer to home.
- 4.4 Participants' perceptions of the information provided at the sites were as follows:-
- Six out of the 22 groups felt that they did not find out the information they needed prior to the visit; the walk leader in another five groups had been able to collect sufficient information; and another five groups were familiar with the NNR or had information from a previous visit.
 - Groups indicated that they would search in the following places for NNR information: Tourist Information Centre, internet (walk site, local village website), local library, SNH and FCS offices, local paper, village notice board, local hotel, local authority service point, post office, chemist.
 - The consultants felt examples of very good interpretive leaflets and site based interpretation were:
 - Loch Leven Heritage trail (not produced by SNH)
 - St. Abbs Head (NTS leaflet)
 - Falls of Clyde (SWT leaflet), but the walkers did not actually use it
 - Kirkconnell Flow, although this was not suitable for a health walk
 - St. Cyrus has a good visitor centre and good interpretive panels along the path.

- Taynish has good leaflets and colour coded way marking
- However, none of these contained *health-walk specific* information. Overall, there was almost no specific information targeted at health walk groups, with the exception of all-abilities trails, some of which were too short.
- There was a distinction between use of site interpretation provided through leaflets and site interpretation through boards. For example, the group loved the informative bird hides at Insh Marshes NNR, however, there were good leaflets at a number of sites but the groups did not necessarily refer to them or use them.

Getting to the National Nature Reserve

- 4.5 Proximity to the NNR was a key factor influencing a group's interest and motivation to walk there. The requirement to arrange additional transport from that used normally was a big disincentive.
- Six of the groups needed additional transport than normally used by the group to get to the NNR.
 - In the majority of cases, the NNR location was out with the normal travelling range of walks used by the groups. This trial walk was seen as a special trip by some of the groups.
 - Availability of public transport to the majority of the NNRs was non-existent, and in some groups, participants would not find public transport easy to use.

Enjoyment, welcome and contact with National Nature Reserve staff

- 4.6 Group feedback can be summarised as follows.
- A resounding "yes thoroughly" was given by 20 of the groups to enjoyment of their walk; two of these stating enjoyment despite wet, windy, cloudy conditions. The remaining two groups did enjoy the walk BUT one felt it could have been longer, the other that they had to watch their feet all the time and were unable to enjoy the scenery.
 - The majority of groups felt welcome on arrival. Four groups were met and greeted in person by NNR staff. Others felt welcome due to information boards, good signage or due to familiarity with the site.
 - Six groups did not really feel welcome; at one NNR the visitor centre was closed and another was under construction; at others there were no staff on site.
 - Nine groups had no contact with NNR staff; three groups were taken on a guided walk and five were joined by staff for the feedback discussion. In the remainder of the groups, contact was made prior to the walk by the walk leader or the consultant.
 - It should be noted that the terms of the contract stated a preference for the walks to be conducted as per normal health walk procedures and to be lead by the usual Paths to Health walk leader, rather than by a ranger or NNR staff.

Suitability for health walk

- 4.7 A recurring issue emerging during the study was the basic suitability of NNRs for promotion to, and regular use by, health walk groups. This was reflected in feedback on the following core issues:
- Location of NNR in relation to the group and transport requirements to get there
 - Length and variety of routes
 - Physical characteristics of the walk including terrain and path surface.

- Eight of the 20 reserves were felt to meet the walking needs of the health walk group very well, and there was one comment that it was much better than other routes available in the area (Beinn Eighe).
- Four of the NNR walks tested were regarded as unsuitable for a health walk due to a mix of paths being too steep, having too many steps, having loose stones or the path too narrow.
- Two NNR walks were felt to be too short and not demanding enough – but this may have been a reflection of a more able and experienced local group participating in the study.
- The remaining eight NNR walks were regarded as suitable up to a point, meaning suitable for most of the group but not suitable for a beginner group, eliciting comments such as “more taxing than usual for some”, “marginal – on the cusp of being too difficult”, “more suitable than expected”, “some reservations – need a stick and a bit uneven for some”.
- Five of the groups commented that they could NOT recommend this route for people with limited mobility, due to some sections of the route being too difficult, or having uneven surfaces. They felt there is a need for information to make it clear that the route is not suitable for less able walkers.

4.8 The length of routes was commented on as below:-

- The distance of the walks was considered about right by 13 of the 22 groups, taking between one and one and a half hours at a slow pace with several rest stops.
- Eight groups found the route a little too short – in some cases especially given the length of the drive to get there. These routes were thought to be suitable for first-timers, but some regulars wanted more than a 45 minute or a 400m all-abilities trail.

4.9 The variety of routes available was summarised in group feedback as follows:-

- At nine of the 20 NNRs, the groups were aware of suitable variations in route and felt that there was sufficient interest to return to the site. Two of these routes were linear, and a circular route was preferred. Some of these routes were outside the NNR boundary.
- The groups felt there were few other suitable routes at six of the NNRs, bar walking the single loop route in the opposite direction.
- Four of the groups reported that the other route options were not suitable for health walks as the surface was too uneven, steep or the extended version too long.

4.10 Path design and condition was a major point of feedback. Detailed comments specific to individual NNR routes are given in the site reports in Appendix 1. The comments below illustrate the type and range of concerns raised by participants.

Example of Health Walk Group Concerns

- Gradient a bit much for some in parts, or steep too early in the walk before warmed up. Concern it could be slippery with rain.
- The depth of the steps was too great in places for people who cannot bend their knees far.
- Narrow paths: the width needs to allow two people to walk side by side for physical support if required and for the social aspects of the walk.
- Overhanging vegetation and tree regeneration too near to the path needs to be trimmed back to maintain the full path width.
- Terrain and surface problems which made walking hard, including uneven rocky surface, loose gravel, large stones on path, rough grass and soft sand.
- Obstacles in the path, such as stepping over wide drains/culverts, exposed tree roots, cattle grids caused some people concern and crossing streams on slippery stones.

Rabbit holes were a potential hazard on one walk.

- Boardwalks were poorly maintained in places and caused problems for those with walking sticks.
- Poor drainage and flood prone parts of the path left water logging and big puddles in places.

4.11 Suggestions for addressing difficulties included installing hand railings in strategic places and regular benches for rests, particularly in spots sheltered from the wind.

Intention of repeat visit

4.12 The overall response to interest in further visits was very positive:

- 15 of the 22 groups said they would like to visit again – some as health walk groups but others as individuals or with friends and family.
- Two groups felt they may possibly visit, for example if transport was provided.
- Only the group visiting Caerlaverock NNR said they would not return whilst the path was in its current condition.
- In two of the groups, only the leaders planned to return.

4.13 Other comments were made on positive reasons to return at particular times of year, and possible deterrents to a return, as below.

Site-specific Health Walk Group Comments

- Seasonality may affect return visits. Midges in summer may be a deterrent. Oak woodlands are particularly attractive in spring and autumn. (Taynish NNR)
- The only barrier to a visit would be a sea haar. Otherwise the group felt it would be interesting at any time of year especially as the 'sea changes and is different every time'. Interest is all year round but is best May – July for dune flora. (St.Cyrus)
- There is no need to go to Knockan when we have Ullapool Hill path. Unlikely to go more than once or twice per year as a group.

Views on best aspects of National Nature Reserves

4.14 Walkers were asked "What did you like particularly about this reserve?" There was clear appreciation of the natural environment, the scenery and the sense of place and serenity of the NNRs, as reflected in a selection of comments below. A number of practical attractions were also highlighted.

Sample Comments of Health Walk Group Experience

Sense of place

- The ridge trail gave us the feeling of getting out into the wilderness which is a rare opportunity if you are not an experienced walker and cannot climb the mountains.
- The sense of remoteness
- Scenery – especially the river, the drive up the Glen, water, waterfall, ripples, variety of trees. The walk being right alongside the water, and the seating provided there. It feels like a unique area.
- There is lots of natural interest, there is enough here for a whole day, having a guided walk added to the interest.
- Quiet, peaceful, varied environment, birds, flowers, butterflies, wildlife, views, fresh air.

Practical advantages

- It is close to where we live and easily accessible.
- It is a walk that could be done in any weather as it is not open and exposed and the tree cover provides some protection.
- Well-looked after, paths good.
- Well signposted, great views, information available, clean toilets, good parking for the bus, being up high, seeing views from different perspective. Liked wildness.
- They were impressed with the level of information provision and all the educational aspects – some walkers read all the interpretive boards. They felt it was very family friendly, fun and educational. Some particularly liked the web cam on the bird feeder.

4.15 Health walk participants were then asked “How did this place make you feel and how would you describe the walk?” Descriptions of the walks conveyed an enjoyment of the places visited and a strong sense of well being, as illustrated below.

Sample Comments of Health Walk Group Feelings

- Felt good, and a sense of achievement. Generally a good sense of physical and emotional well-being seemed to be shared across the whole group although the walk had been demanding
- Struck by the scenic beauty of the site - ‘when the wind, blows the trees and the noise are attractive’.
- A most attractive walk and the varied terrain – the up and down nature of the paths, had added to the pleasure, as the difficulty was not seen as prolonged.
- A variety of the landscapes, with the patchy nature of the open birch woodland, and the agricultural land adjacent.
- The group offered the following descriptions: diverse, picturesque, scenic, interesting, easy, breezy- healthy, refreshing, quite nice, fantastic, contrasts - good variety, smells old trees give you a different feeling, educational.
- One member summed it up with “a picturesque easy walk for all ages”.

Suggestions for improvements

4.16 A number of aspects relating to NNR walks were raised for attention to make them more suited for the health walk user. The main issues highlighted for improvement are summarised below under key headings.

Development within a natural environment

4.17 A number of comments reflected the importance of the rural and tranquil setting of the walk to participants, indicating a view that any development of the site should not detract from the quietness and remoteness of the site, even if this limited access. This, for example, prompted one group discussion about whether it is appropriate to upgrade paths to all-ability trails and whether this would detract from the natural environment.

Infrastructure and facilities

4.18 Quite a number of site-specific suggestions were made regarding the walk infrastructure (paths, seating etc) and these can be found in the individual site reports in Appendix 1. The following more general observations have been drawn from the feedback and applied to all health walks:-

General Health Walk Group Comments on Infrastructure Requirements

- Boardwalks are acceptable if well maintained, but preferably they should allow enough room for people to walk side by side.
- Overgrowing and overhanging vegetation narrows the path and causes an overhead hazard. Regular trimming is required to keep the path accessible to health walkers.
- Kissing gates and stiles are barriers to wheelchair users, pushchairs and pregnant women.
- Hand rails would be welcome in vulnerable places such as on parts of steps, passing places on steps, steep drops etc.
- Regularly spaced seating is essential. A picnic area en route would be attractive.
- An indoor refreshments outlet is particularly important for health walk groups after their exercise. This would be a welcome addition on some NNRs, and information or directions to other local facilities could be provided.
- Path surfaces need to be level, but also avoid the use of large stones and loose gravel.
- Way markers are needed at each path junction to give people confidence and this was sometimes missing.
- Open drains or burns need to be covered at the crossing point rather than the use of stepping stones.
- In some cases, new or improved connections to routes outside the NNR would provide a wider variety of route options.

Signage

- 4.19 Suggestions were made regarding signage both along path routes within the NNR, and externally on the approach to reach the NNR itself. Participants view on basic requirements can be summarised as:-

General Health Walk Group Suggestions for Signage

- Provision required of site maps and corresponding coloured way markers all along the route, not just at the start.
- Clear signposting to reach the NNR from the main road right to the car park and, if not obvious, to the start of the walk route

Interpretation and education

- 4.20 The educational information, both boards and leaflets, was commented on by many groups. However, in practice most groups were observed not to actually read them; participants' focus seemed to be on the walk itself and social interaction, catching up with their friends. However, despite this there were suggestions for:-

General Health Walk Group Suggestions Regarding Interpretation

- Web cam cameras, particularly those focussed on birds' nests and activities.
- An interpretive leaflet for adults to take round the trail with orientation points (like FC's finger posts) and features of interest highlighted.
- More information boards along the way to give more of an experience.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW CAN NNRS IN SCOTLAND BE DEVELOPED FOR HEALTH WALK GROUPS?

5.1 Many of those taking part in health walks are a new audience to NNRS in Scotland. The feedback clearly shows that many of the walkers who had not thought of doing an NNR route got a pleasant surprise on their walk at the NNR. However, the feedback also reveals that there are considerable improvements that could be made in a number of areas. This section draws out the recommendations based on the study findings.

Understanding the needs of health walk participants

5.2 The study has highlighted a number of limitations and opportunities in a potential “match” between health walk groups and NNR walks, based on the innate characteristics of both. These are considered first before looking at detailed recommendations.

5.3 The specific needs, objectives and perceptions of health walk groups need to be understood and taken into account when considering how best to promote or adapt NNRS to this user group. Paths to Health has in-depth experience of working with these groups and their experience should be drawn on.

Health walk group composition, recruitment and progression

5.4 Understanding who health walkers are is fundamental to matching them to potential NNR walks. A health walk group may include any, or a range, of the following participants:

- Walkers requiring physical support from a linked arm – therefore needing to walk side by side;
- Visually impaired who may need guidance or have a guide dog;
- Walkers using a walking stick for support;
- Parents with buggies;
- Walkers experiencing social isolation;
- Walkers with limited general mobility or joint movement;
- Stroke recoverers with balance issues;
- Walkers with heart or weight conditions who require to rest regularly along the route and
- Motorised wheel chairs.

5.5 Recruitment of new members is challenging for Paths to Health and a walks programme needs to be designed in a way which maximises its attractiveness to newcomers and is unthreatening. This means using local walks which require little time to reach, are achievable and enjoyable. Consequently, walk leaders are very careful how they select and promote their health walks.

5.6 One of the main aims of health walks is to introduce progression into a person’s level of physical activity. This study undertook health walks with groups from across the spectrum – beginner through to experienced walk groups. There is a gradation of needs through the levels of experience.

5.7 Participants’ enthusiasm for walking as a result of a very positive experience will frequently result in the group members looking for new opportunities for independent walking. So, they introduce friends and family to new destinations for short trips from

home or on holidays. This could be developed into a key strength and role of NNRs within health walk progression given the range of challenge offered at NNRs.

Health walk location, distance and transport

- 5.8 Normal practice is for health walks to be organised on the doorstep, and there is a limited willingness to travel, especially with new participants. This minimises the time that people have to free up in order to participate. The target audience for recruitment is simply not going to participate if required to travel long distances and set aside half a day to take part.
- 5.9 The distribution of existing health walk groups throughout Scotland is patchy. Not all NNRs have an active nearby group, for example a walk at Tentsmuir could not be undertaken for this reason, despite the local area being well populated and the site offering good walk options.
- 5.10 The walks organised under this study were viewed by many groups as a “special trip”, rather than a regular health walk outing. For example, St Abbs Head was almost a full day outing, and the Cairnsmore of Fleet walk was at least 10 miles from the nearest town, including a 30 min journey down a 5 mile single track road. In addition, nearly all the NNRs have poor public transport links and required bespoke transport arrangements to be made. This proves quite an obstacle to health walk groups using some NNRs. There may be potential for a less frequent “mystery” visit, for example on an annual basis.

Health walkers’ expectations

- 5.11 The perceptions and expectations of some participants had been quite different from their actual experience, as illustrated by the extracts below:-
- “More people had been invited to join this walk but didn’t turn up. It was surmised by those present that some were put off either by the distance to drive or a perception that the walk would be too difficult.” [St Abbs Head]
- “Some residents at the hospital did not want to come when they heard about a ‘woodland walk’. They may have had preconceived ideas that it would be too far or too hard a walk.” [Taynish]
- 5.12 Many walkers are taking part for the social aspect as much as the health benefits. They are frequently attracted by the fact that everything is organised for them and that they make friends readily with other group members.
- 5.13 While recognising the above limitations, a clear sense of impact on emotional and spiritual well-being came over in the feedback discussions following the NNR walks (paragraphs 4.14 and 4.15). Most groups were delighted to have been taken somewhere different and found the natural environment and special place uplifting.
- 5.14 It must be recognised that given progression, some health walkers move on to walk independently as well as with a group. A different marketing approach is required if SNH wishes to also target independent health walkers rather than groups.

National Nature Reserve profile and promotion

- 5.15 Given the needs outlined above (paragraphs 5.2 to 5.14), it is recommended that SNH takes a targeted approach to marketing NNR health walks, as clearly some NNRs can be ruled out on grounds of distance and transport links. The scope for health walks in many NNRs appears to lie more strongly in progression, rather than new walkers, and so the target market would be the more experienced health walk groups or individuals who have developed the confidence to health walk independently.
- 5.16 Nearly half the participating groups (10 out of 22) had already walked at the NNR as a group. However, many of those who had visited one of the sites previously did not actually realise that it was an NNR. Although most participants had heard of NNRs, the profile of potential health walks within the NNRs was very low and could be improved.
- 5.17 In promoting NNR walks to groups, distinction has to be made between participants who come on the walks and the leaders who organise the walks; it is the latter (the Paths to Health co-ordinators and walk leaders) who are the critical single point of contact to target with information and promotion on the suitability of NNRs for health walks – rather than the walkers themselves. The groups rely on them to plan the venue and route, and be an informative guide. A monthly Paths to Health e-bulletin is circulated to all leaders and SNH could work with Paths to Health to use this as a forum for information and promotion.
- 5.18 Provision of health walk-specific information for websites, maps and leaflets is recommended as follows:
- Very few, if any, NNR maps, leaflets and websites currently provide adequate information for health walk groups. These should incorporate a specific health walk section to acknowledge and highlight both opportunities and limitations for health walkers in NNRs. Health walkers are interested in details of the physical challenge along the routes as well as the distance e.g. steepness, steps, rest places etc
 - Information about NNR facilities should be available both in advance (e.g. on web) and at the site, including specific details on accessibility, seasonality and opening hours and other nearest available facilities.
 - A clear link should be provided between all NNR websites and the Paths to Health website.
 - Health walkers, both groups and independent, searching the web for route options are unlikely to go to NNR sites as a first port of call. SNH should use other websites to promote NNR health walks with maps and information. One example is www.walkingworld.com, which is a membership site which provides maps for all routes listed. This site is used to plan all walks by the group that participated in the St Cyrus walk.
 - SNH could ensure that its own NNR sites and any entries it places on other sites are worded and positioned so that they respond to a health walk google.
 - Any promotion of walks in an NNR area should not differentiate between routes inside and outside the NNR boundary. This is not important to the health walker. Routes that take groups outside the NNR boundary should also be considered and included in any promotion SNH does in the future. In addition, it may also encourage health walkers to visit if local facilities (toilets, refreshments etc) offered nearby, but outwith the NNR boundary, were also included in promotion.

- Some NNRs are suitable for health walks only at certain times of year, due to the impact of the weather on routes, or availability of facilities. Again, it would be helpful if this information was available prior to visiting the site.
 - Encouragement to visit could be given through positive promotion of specific seasonal features and highlights at any NNR e.g. oak woods, wildlife.
 - SNH could promote suitable NNRs at the annual Paths to Health networking event.
- 5.19 Two proactive approaches came to light during the study which may be useful in developing SNH's promotional approach:
- 5.20 Firstly, a promotional NNR DVD has just been made by John Halliday, Taynish reserve manager. It may be distributed to local hospital residents or used through doctors' surgeries to hopefully spark an interest and provide more information about walking in the NNR. It is recommended that usage and impact of the DVD is monitored and, if successful, this could be replicated as best practice for other NNRs.
- 5.21 Secondly, Step it Up Highland has suggested a participatory event in the Lairg/Golspie/Dornoch area later this year. This will explore how best to set up a walking group and find out barriers to people joining such a group and getting out walking at this level. Highland Council Ranger service is interested in being involved. Again, lessons and solutions arising from this event could potentially be applied to other areas. Some countryside rangers may have received health walk training, and which, when combined with their natural history knowledge, can add great value in this respect to a guided health walk.
- 5.22 A further promotional issue is presence and quality of road and approach signage to the actual NNR site once in the general area. There may be a conflict between conservation and access at a sensitive site, but if health walks are to be encouraged on NNRs the walkers have to be able to find the site! Examples of NNRs where approach signs are lacking are Blawhorn Moss, Taynish, Craigellachie and Kirkconnell Flow.

Communication and links between SNH and health walk groups

- 5.23 Paths to Health provides high quality support to all those who take part. The combination of the emerging profile of the NNRs, the strong and supportive network of Paths to Health schemes, the unique aims of the other partner organisations and walking organisations will be invaluable in forming the basis for future promotion of walking opportunities for these groups. The findings highlight the importance of involving Paths to Health in design and targeting of promotion.
- 5.24 Leaders and scheme co-ordinators are always looking for suggestions for slightly more demanding walks once a walker's needs are beyond the scope of a health walk (normally 1 hour). Promoting selected NNRs, SNH could offer this progression to more challenging walks on NNRs where there is a developed network of routes – such as Knockan Crag, Tentsmuir and Muir of Dinnet.
- 5.25 SNH could offer information and awareness raising of suitable NNR opportunities to Paths to Health leaders, and also support NNR staff to become more informed of the Paths to Health programme and operations. This could be offered in the form of an open day or one-to-one visit at suitable NNR sites for co-ordinators, some of whom manage several health walk groups.
- 5.26 Among both NNR and Paths to Health staff contacted during the study, there were only one or two taking a proactive approach to link NNRs and health walks. At some

NNR sites, there appeared to be a perception and level of anxiety that working with health walkers as a user group would lead to urban-style paths encroaching on the natural environment. Other NNR staff welcomed a new type of user to the site.

- 5.27 In some areas located near boundaries of local authorities, there seemed to be slight territorial issues with no single co-ordinator taking responsibility. The group that walked at St. Cyrus NNR is self-started and managed rather than set up by Paths to Health. Such groups should not be overlooked when considering promotion and communication routes.
- 5.28 Other organisations or contacts who might be able to assist in the future marketing and promotion of health walks in NNRs include the local physiotherapist or cardiac rehabilitation classes, the health visitor or community nurse, local cafes and accommodation providers, the Rambler's Association, Sustrans, community woodland groups, countryside rangers and the Forest Education Initiative.

Physical infrastructure

- 5.29 NNR site-specific feedback and suggestions on the physical infrastructure associated with walk routes are detailed in Appendix 1. General comments which apply across all the sites include:
- Circular loop walks are always preferred to linear paths which return by the same route. To enhance some routes, a short connector path could be made to link to other existing paths out with the NNR boundary.
 - The ability to walk two abreast on a path is essential to meet the needs of health walk participants, for both physical support and social interaction. In addition to minimum width specifications, paths need to be maintained to ensure that encroaching and overhanging vegetation does not impede this.
 - Regular resting places are essential on a route promoted for health walkers. Seats or benches can be designed to avoid imposing an urban feel to a sensitive environment by using options such as carved tree trunks or boulders. However, these must be obvious, accessible and easy for a limited mobility person to sit on! Tynish provided some good examples of this.
 - Having toilets and a café at the visitor centre is a big bonus for this type of group. If these are absent in the NNR itself, information on nearby facilities should be included in promotion.

Suggested specification for infrastructure

- 5.30 The following specifications are suggested as a possible standard for NNR routes being promoted as health walks, based on feedback and the consultants' experience.
- 5.31 These groups are diverse in nature and may include people with a range of infirmities including unsteady on feet or poor balance or walking with aid, joint pain, recent major operations, shortness of breath, visual impairment, or a general state of poor health or unfit; some such groups may also include adults with children in buggies. As such, the suggested specifications are somewhat general in nature. They are an attempt to balance the possible physical requirements of a group of potential visitors to a site, with the need to retain a sense of natural, undisturbed space. They are rather less than full specification all-ability trails, but sufficiently rigorous to avoid disenfranchising this important potential client group.

Path surface

- 5.32 Paths need not be hard surfaced, however they should be well-drained, without permanent muddy puddles or large areas of surface water. Where it is necessary to provide paths with a camber, this should not be such that walking becomes difficult. Paths should generally be reasonably level and without significantly protruding rocks or tree roots (maximum protrusion <50mm) or holes. Where steep ditches and banks are crossed, consideration should be given to levelling the path. Paths should be free of obstacles such as branches or other similar hazards which may make walking difficult.

Path width

- 5.33 In order to allow two people to walk side by side, paths should normally be >1800mm wide. It is not necessary for a whole route to be this wide, but this should be the norm. For short sections of narrower path, the width should be no less than 1200mm wide.

Slopes

- 5.34 The ability to cope with sloping paths is very particular dependent on a range of physical, psychological and environmental perceptions. It is therefore impossible to prescribe slope characteristics which will meet the needs of all health walk group participants. As a general specification the following is recommended:

- Paths on sloping ground should not have a transverse slope. Paths on sloping ground should be a minimum of 1700mm wide to allow support to be provided to less confident walkers.
- Paths of gradients between 1:12(8%) and 1:7(15%) are acceptable for the majority of walkers in this client group. However, where this angle is prolonged (>25m), level sections should be constructed.
- Paths of gradients between 1:7(15%) and 1:5(20%) should have all the above specifications, and in addition, the provision of a handrail at 1000mm height. Paths of this steeper gradient should be no more than 25m in length.
- Any slopes steeper than 1:5(20%) should be stepped.

Steps

- 5.35 Where it is necessary to provide steps these should be:

- Without a handrail: step height maximum 170mm, tread width 300mm minimum
- Or:
- With a handrail at 1000mm height: step height maximum 200mm, tread width 300mm.

All steps in a flight should be regular. A flight of steps should be no more than 20 steps. Where more than 20 steps are required, breaks between flights should be provided.

Boardwalks

- 5.36 Some members of this client group will find boardwalks a barrier. However for most, boardwalks can be constructed appropriately. All boardwalks should be securely fixed in place so as not to wobble or shake. Steps onto and off boardwalks should be a maximum of 170mm in height. Boardwalks should be 1200mm wide as a minimum, but preferably 1700mm wide to allow support to be provided to less confident walkers and two-way traffic. Gaps between planks should be 12mm to avoid walking aids getting stuck in the gaps. The surface of boardwalks should be covered with chicken wire or treated with anti-slip paint. The provision of handrails at 1000mm height

should be considered, particularly over streams or open water. Loch Leven NNR provides an example of good practice.

Gates

- 5.37 Stiles and kissing gates provide obstacles for people who are particularly unsteady on their feet, people with joint pain and people with buggies. Hinged gates with self-closing devices and self-locking catches provide animal-proof barriers without causing a barrier to this client group. Gates should be at least 1000mm wide.
- 5.38 Cattle grids also cause anxiety to some members of the client group, particularly when wet. Consideration should be given to the provision of pedestrian gates alongside cattle grids.

Vegetation

- 5.39 Vegetation along the length of paths should be regularly cut back to avoid it falling over the path and reducing effective path width. To ensure this a 500mm strip should be cut short, as required on either side of the path. There should be no overhanging vegetation over the path below a height of 2000mm.

Benches

- 5.40 Regular opportunities should be provided for short breaks. Seating of some kind should perhaps be provided at suitable intervals along a path, depending on the nature of the path and the landscape setting. This seating could be in the form of manufactured benches, logs provided for seating, appropriately positioned boulders or railings to lean against. When positioning seating, consideration should be given to: views and natural interest; protection from the elements, particularly wind; rest points after more difficult sections of path; the social context of rest points.

Potential opportunities for health walk development in National Nature Reserves

- 5.41 Table 1 provides an overview of health walk suitability at present, and aspects requiring attention to improve suitability at each NNR site included in the study. This assessment is based on the feedback provided by the health walk participants and the consultants' experience.
- 5.42 The needs of health walkers are complex and vary depending on the stage of progression, therefore this table provides pointers for promotion and improvement of NNRs for health walk routes rather than a categorical solution. Reference should be made to Appendix 1 for further detail about each site.

Table 1 : Summary of Potential for NNR Development for Health Walks

National Nature Reserve	Present suitability as a health walk	Information and signage required to improve suitability	Physical works required to improve suitability	Distance of NNR from walk group's base
Abernethy	All levels			11 miles from Aviemore
Beinn Eighe	Intermediate Experienced		Path width Vegetation Steps Path surface (parts puddled)	21 miles from Gairloch
Ben Lawers	Not at all	Signage at entrance Interpretation	Path surface Path width Steps Slopes Vegetation Boardwalks Benches	57 miles from Blairgowrie 6 miles from Killin
Blawhorn Moss	Beginners Intermediate	Way marking Signage on route	Benches	4 miles from Armadale
Caerlaverock	Intermediate		Path surface Vegetation Boardwalks Benches	8 miles from Dumfries
Cairnmore of Fleet	Experienced	Way marking Signage at entrance Signage on route	Path surface	15 miles from Kirkcudbright
Clyde Valley Woodlands/ Falls of Clyde	All levels	Signage at entrance Signage on route Way marking	Handrails Stairs	8 miles from Forth
Craigellachie	Beginners	Signage at entrance Way markers	Path surface Slope (at entrance outside NNR)	1 km from meeting place in Aviemore
Flanders Moss (No walk done)	Not at All			
Forvie, Newburgh	All levels	Signage at entrance	Path surface Path width Benches	6 miles Ellon to Collieston 5 miles Ellon to Waterside CP
Glen Affric	Intermediate Experienced	Signage at entrance Interpretation Way marking	Path width Path surface Slopes Benches	To Dog Falls:- 5 miles from Cannich 24 miles from Muir of Ord
Glen Tanar	All levels	Signage – everywhere! Interpretation	Path surface	3.5 miles from Aboyne to car park

Insh Marshes	Intermediate Experienced	Way marking (church & meadow area only)	Path surface Path width Steps Slopes Benches	65 miles from Inverness 1.5 miles from Kingussie
Kirkconnell Flow (No walk done)	Not at All		Path surface	5 miles from Dumfries
Knockan Crag	Intermediate Experienced	Signage at entrance Way marking	Steps	14 miles from Ullapool
Loch Fleet	All levels	Signage at Balblair Wood and Littleferry Leaflet/map	Benches Path surface	2 miles to Balblair 3 miles to Littleferry
Loch Leven	All levels			9.5 miles from Perth
Loch Lomond	All levels	Way marking Signage on route	Benches	17 miles from Dumbarton
Muir of Dinnet	All levels	Signage at Burn O'Vat and New Kinnord		7 miles from Logiecoldstone to Burn O'Vat 5 miles to Loch Kinnord
St Abbs Head	Experienced	Signage on route	Path surface Path width Slopes Benches	45 miles from Galashiels
St Cyrus	Intermediate Experienced		Path surface – rabbit holes	Car park 1.5 miles from St Cyrus. 6 miles from Montrose; 7 miles from Inverbervie
Taynish	All levels – for 300 m Mill trail	Interpretation Signage on route	Steps Slope - at end of Mill trail to shore Additional route to explore Mill	Car park 1.5 miles from Tayvallich; 13 miles from Lochgilphead
Tentsmuir (No walk done)	Likely suitability			1.5 miles from Tayport

NOTES:

- Guidelines used to distinguish levels of walkers:-
Beginners: walking pace 2-3 km/ hour; do not like hills or complex ground.
Intermediate: walking pace 4 km/ hour, covering about 7-8 km in 1.5 - 2 hours.
Experienced: walking pace 5-6 km / hour; longer walks and more complex ground.
Not at All: route not deemed suitable for any level of health walk.
- Improvements were underway at Cairnsmore of Fleet at the time of the research visit.

APPENDICES

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APPENDIX 1: INDIVIDUAL NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE FOCUS GROUP REPORTS

NNR NAME: ABERNETHY FOREST (Dell Wood)

Date: Tuesday 7th August 2007

Meeting point: 14.00 at RDs restaurant, Aviemore with transport provided to the walk start point.

Group: Aviemore Step It Up Highland (also did Craigellachie walk)

Route: River Walk – All Abilities Option i.e. circular - out along the river path and return by Dell Road

Duration of walk: 1 hour

Weather conditions: Dry, cloudy and very cold due to the wind.

Size of group:

10 women in total (including leaders and assistants).

Composition:

- 3 women Step It Up Highland walk leaders/assistants.
- 7 women (approx age range mid 60s - 70s), two having severe visual impairments and requiring to walk with sighted guidance; one with a heart medical history and needing to take regular rests; one person was new to the group.

Level of experience:

The group has been going for a number of years, with ebbs and flows in activity. Participants are used to doing flat walks at a very modest pace where the walking surface is very even, up to a very maximum of an hour. Some members are working on confidence building after illness. All Abilities trails are ideal for this group.

Background:

Aviemore Step It Up Highland group has reactivated this summer 2007, and now meets every Tuesday afternoon. The group has a number of committed and experienced helpers who appeared to be well informed in terms of organisational aspects (transport, logistics) and responsive to participants needs. The group have quite a wide recent repertoire, walking at Glen Mhor, Lily Loch (woodland and open moor), Dalraddie, Loch an Eilean, and Boat of Garten. There are many good paths in the area due to the strong tourism industry.

Have you heard of NNRs?

Yes, all participants knew of the existence of NNRs but not in any detail, The majority of them had participated in the Craigellachie walk in July so were also aware of NNRs from this.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve?

No-one in the group seemed to be aware that this footpath existed and that it was part of the Abernethy Forest NNR. However, some were generally aware of the existence Abernethy Forest NNR.

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

No – only the leader had been there to carry out the risk assessment. The group had been unaware of the existence of the path and it is slightly further than the group would usually travel to their walk.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

Undertaken by Step It Up Walk Leaders.

How did you get here?

In a local 8-seater taxi plus one private car. Approximately 15-20 mins for the 11 mile journey each way. This transport had to be arranged specially. The Badenoch and Strathspey Community Transport Company people carrier (carries 6 people plus member driver) is usually available to the group each Tuesday between 2pm-4pm, unless it has other full day bookings – which it did on 7th Aug.

Did you feel welcome?

The walk felt pleasant and inviting, although there was no particular welcome given to the group. The Explore Abernethy ranger knew the group was coming to try the walk but was unable to assist with the walk.

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

The walk leader was able to pick up a walks pack from the Explore Abernethy Centre. As the centre is not open full-time, it was suggested that it would be useful to display opening times on the door and on the phone message as one person visited a couple of times and found it closed.

There were two useful leaflets “Explore Abernethy” which gives a guide to the wider path network, and a River Walk interpretive guide produced by local primary school children.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

In organising the walk, the walk leaders and consultant spoke to the Explore Abernethy ranger to get information about the paths and to sound out options for refreshments. She did not speak to the walk group itself.

Did you enjoy it?

Yes – thoroughly enjoyed by all.

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

Yes – perfect. Exactly the type of walk the group requires.

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

Just right – one hour at a slow pace with lots of rest stops is perfect for the group.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained?

Just right. There were two small puddled, muddy areas across the path which had to be walked around on the grass, but everyone agreed that given the extreme wet weather we have been experiencing the path was in very good condition.

Variety of routes

There is only the one route that is suitable for this group due to their requirement of a flat all-abilities type of path. The return section of the River Walk that goes through the wood may be a possibility, although there are some steps and it is not made up as an all-abilities route. The other walks would also be too long.

Suitable for the size of group

The path worked well for the group of 10, as although walkers became spread out there were plenty of benches for them to sit on and wait for the others to catch up.

Would you come back?

The group would come back for a Tuesday walk if transport is available. Transport is usually the limiting factor in where they can go: the community minibus is used when it is available, which takes up to 6 and the driver. They supplement this with cars when possible but not many of the group members drive.

What did you like particularly about this Reserve?

The walk being right alongside the water, and the seating provided there. It feels like a unique area.

What aspects do you think need to be improved?

None – ideal as it is.

NNR NAME: BEINN EIGHE

Date: Monday 16th July 2007

Meeting point: 11.15am at the Beinn Eighe visitor centre car park

Group: Poolewe Step It Up Highland

Route: All 3 of the marked trails were walked as a single linked circuit: Picnic trail (yellow), Rhyming trail (orange) and Ridge trail (pink and green).

Duration of walk: 1 hour for the slowest members;

Weather conditions: Steady rain for the duration; misty with limited views; wet underfoot with puddled water lying on the path in places.

Size of group:

15 in total (including leaders and assistants).

Composition: 4 men and 11 women

- This included 5 trained walk leaders: of these 3 take a lead role and 2 work as assistants, for example keeping a watch at the rear of the party.
- One member had recently had a stroke and is just regaining confidence to go out walking; for her it is particularly important to have confidence in the walk leaders and where they are taking the group.
- Two members were in their 80s (one nearly 90).

Level of experience:

This was varied. Some of the walkers have been regular attendees since the group formed, whilst others have just recently joined. For some, the group is the only walking that they ever do; others go on their own privately arranged outings for a full day longer distance walk. Levels of fitness and ability have quite a wide range within the group.

Background:

The group has been running for 4 years. Members come from around the Poolewe area, including Laide, Badachro, Mellon Charles and Inverasdale. A few also attend the Gairloch Step It Up group on a Thursday, but this tends to offer more demanding walks.

Have you heard of NNRs? Yes - everyone in the group knew of NNRs.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? Yes – all the group know about it.

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

The Step It Up group had used the NNR previously for one of its regular walks.

Only 5 people in the group had not visited and walked at this site before. One had not been due to lack of time due to caring responsibilities at home.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

Carried out by a Step It Up Highland volunteer walk leader from Inverness.

How did you get here?

The group arrived in shared cars belonging to members. This is the usual way that the group operates to get to their walks. They nearly always have to travel to the start point of the walk in cars, meeting first in Poolewe.

Did you feel welcome?

An SNH staff member came over to the car park for their arrival to specifically give a welcome.

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

The group already had information about the NNR from their previous visit. Most people knew about the leaflet available.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

On their previous walk visits, no contact had been made with NNR staff. SNH Kinlochewe staff came and joined the group at the café for lunch after the walk.

Did you enjoy it?

Yes, despite the wet conditions and that everyone's outer layers got soaked, the whole group said they had enjoyed the outing.

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

Very much so. The facility was viewed as excellent and a much better path than most of more local routes that the group usually walks where it is often uneven and boggy.

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

Just right, 30 mins out and 30 mins back. This is what the group usually does.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained?

- The paths could be slightly wider - need to be wide enough to allow 2 people to walk side by side. This is necessary when a person needs to be supported with linked arms to provide balance and confidence.
- [Rhyming Trail] The vegetation at the side of the path needs to be trimmed back, as it has become very lush and overgrown. It is falling on to the path, especially the tall bracken, which has the effect of narrowing the width of the path.
- [Rhyming Trail] in a number of places there was standing water gathering in big puddles across the width of the path. Drainage needs addressing in places given heavy rain at present.
- [Ridge Trail] The steps on the descent section were generally okay in terms of width and depth (some older participants had to take one step at a time sideways on) BUT the final step in any short series always seemed to be much deeper than the rest. This caused difficulty for some who were unable to bend sufficiently to reach down the step and so needed assistance. ***It was recommended that an extra step needs to be incorporated here to make to height of the step manageable.***
- [Ridge Trail] The participant who is recovering after a stroke found the uphill section quite hard and felt quite unbalanced on the surface. She felt this was due to the softness of the surface which was like walking on ash and a bit wobbly rather than hard and firm.

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest.

Felt to be good. The layout of the paths offered a choice for different abilities. The group felt that if it had been too hard for anyone, it would have been quite easy to turn back and only do a part of the trail.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

Felt to be okay due the number of trained leaders in the party (5 trained with 10 walker members). In effect the overall group did separate into 2 parties due to the speed of walking, with some trained support staying with each group. However, both groups did complete the

some route, with perhaps 15 mins between them. It would have been quite feasible for the group to split completely with some turning back to re-trace the path and meet back at the cars if required.

However, if the number of trained leaders had been smaller, it may have been difficult to keep the group together given the rainy conditions and people not wanting to hang about.

Would you come back? When, who with?

Yes definitely. With the group or family and visitors. It was felt that the lower trail was suitable to bring disabled friends and family. Some had already visited to bring children.

What did you like particularly about this Reserve?

- The Ridge trail gave the feeling of getting out into the wilderness which is a rare opportunity if you are not an experienced walker and cannot climb the mountains.
- They were impressed with the level of information provision and all the educational aspects – some walkers read all the interpretive boards on the walk. They felt it was very child and family friendly and fun although educational. Some particularly liked the web cam on the bird feeder.

What aspects do you think need to be improved?

In general, the group felt the NNR was a very good facility but suggested a couple of added features which they felt would go down well:-

- more web cam cameras further up the trail/mountain particularly focussed on birds' nests and activities;
- an interpretive leaflet for adults to take round the trail with orientation points and features of interest highlighted – like the one at Glasletter that is available from a coin slot dispenser for £1.

To finish, SNH staff outlined a proposal for path development and asked for comments. The 2 plans that SNH have on mind are:-

- to create a path off the road from the village to the visitor centre.
- to create a low level path with only slight rises from the visitor centre going around the base of Beinn Eighe parallel to the Torridon road, to allow people to explore a bit further without a climb.

The group gave the following views:-

- Creation of the path itself is the most important thing to provide more variation on walking. Picnic and other facilities are available at the visitor centre as a hub. Any new paths leading away from the area could have fewer facilities, but maybe some resting points/benches.
- Any new routes should include signposting at the start of any walk to indicate how long the route is and the degree of ascent.
- There were mixed views on the availability of guided walks. Some felt that people prefer to wander round and explore themselves, other felt that occasional locally advertised walks would be of interest. At present, the visitor centre works on a self-help basis and guided walks can be arranged on request rather than a regular schedule.

NNR NAME: BEN LAWERS

Date: 25th June 2007

Meeting point: Kenmore Hotel, Kenmore. Discussion took 1 hour.

Group: Walk leader, who is also a Mountain Leader, and Blairgowrie & District Next Steps group (next progression from Stride for Life). Next Steps group typically walk sites within $\frac{3}{4}$ hour journey time of Blairgowrie between 930am and 330pm. *Not* a typical Health Walk group - they were all experienced health walkers and some HW leaders. *Atypical* walk route – all sections including the lower loop did not meet the criteria for a typical health walk, and out of this group's normal range in time and distance travelled.

Route: The group's route included the Nature trail element (within the enclosure) at Ben Lawers NNR (group walked this in clockwise direction – NTS numbered route is anticlockwise). Taking the western side is an easier ascent. They continued beyond this to include Beinn Glas and Ben Lawers. The comments below focus on the loop section.

Duration of walk: 7 hours. The nature trail loop itself is an approx. 1.5 hour walk.

Weather conditions: very strong N/W winds, low cloud

Size of group: 7 plus leader (3 others unable to come)

Composition: 3 women, 4 men

Level of experience: All been on Stride for Life - now Next Steps level. Meet to walk every Wednesday around Blairgowrie. The three women participants were health walk leaders themselves.

Background: all retired or part time workers, resident in Blairgowrie area

Have you heard of NNRs?: No-one other than group leader

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? All yes, but not NNR status

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

One person other than leader had been to Ben Lawers before. The rest had not because they had perceived it as 'too far' (from Blairgowrie) and 'too hard'.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

No the leader did this using the standard risk assessment form (which was felt to be inadequate) and using Mountain leader experience.

How did you get here?

The group was transported to the NNR in a Perth & Kinross Council mini-bus which had been arranged by the leader.

Did you feel welcome?

Not really. Only signs were demands for payment – parking fee, visitor centre and toilets - which was off-putting. Those who had visited before remembered it was possible to park at the Ben Lawers Hotel if the facilities there are used. One walker compared the site to Glen Shee which they felt offered a much better welcome and free access to facilities.

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

The information on the site was collected by the walk leader previously. He gave every walker a map of the route (unmarked). Two members of the group had read about Ben Lawers in a Munro book and one person brought an OS map.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff? No

Did you enjoy it? All a resounding yes, despite wind, cloud and mist. Great views were commented on.

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group? No. 'Too much', Steps too high

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

The distance of the loop was not a problem (within the HW typical walk of 1-1.5 hour walk at a walking rate of 2km/hour (Stride for Life group can walk at rate of 6km per hour). Very picturesque with flowering plants in ungrazed enclosure). Difficult to vary it (other than walk the other way round the loop, as no other route options were there.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

Yes, the route demands a high level of agility with a number of hazards to navigate but generally well maintained for what it is. The terrain was a problem – dry surface but rocky. Big steps make big drops which is a hazard for those with insecure footing. "A man must have designed the steps" – these were too high – very jarring as the group came down this way. Also two streams to navigate using stepping stones which could be slippery and daunting for inexperienced walkers. Some tree regeneration too close to the path. Gullies and burns were a steep scramble. Stones can be slippery when wet. The duckboards would be 'hopeless' for those using walking sticks. Many trip/ fall hazards exacerbated by wind (one member of the walk was blown over). The loop route itself was easy to follow though ("like Sauchiehall street")

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

No – lack of a network of paths. Members of the group suggested that another bridge as a mid point link across the circular loop would help, as would a raised walkway over the boggy areas, and creation of raised walkways *before* the nature trail outwith the enclosure.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

Would not have wanted a larger group on this walk. However, health walks typically have around 12 people for a short walk. Stride for Life can have 25 – 50 participants.

How did this place make you feel?

Felt good, and a sense of achievement. The walk (enclosure) showed the impact of sheep grazing which people found very interesting and the display of native flowers in the regeneration area had a big impact. Generally a good sense of physical and emotional well-being seemed to be shared across the group although the walk had been demanding.

Would they come back? All - yes, to the reserve/ nature trail area.

NNR NAME: BLAWHORN MOSS

Date: 29th May 2007

Group: 10 walkers of mixed experience of health walking in and around the Armadale area. Seven female and three male walkers all of whom were retired.

Route: The group were led on a circular walk of Blawhorn Moss.

Duration of walk: 30 minutes

Have you heard of NNRs?

Most of the group had heard of the term

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve?

Mixed response, there was awareness of the area but not its label as an NNR

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

Just one member of the group had visited the NNR before today and as part of a health walk programme. The other walkers hadn't been aware that the NNR was an option for walking.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

The Scheme Co-ordinator assisted the volunteer walk leader with the risk assessment

How did you get here?

The group was transported to the NNR by mini-bus which had been arranged by the consultant.

Did you feel welcome?

Not applicable as no staff at the site

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

The information on the site was provided to the group by the consultant.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

Not applicable – no staff present

Did you enjoy it?

"Yes but the walk could've been longer"

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

The walkers in this group were more experienced and as such tend to walk longer distances. However, my opinion is that this would be a gentle introduction to health walking out with the usual local community setting.

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

The walk was pleasant. The walkers commented on the peaceful surroundings and open expanse of land. Options for altering the route were limited and would require further route planning and risk assessment in judging their suitability for health group walkers.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

The walkers agreed that on the whole the walking terrain was pretty good and the simple pathways were mostly flat and even. There were no comments on the boardwalk area. This

would have been added this to the risk assessment as a potential hazard for certain groups of walkers.

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

This route would cater for walkers capable of walking for 30-35 minutes. The walkers commented that the route would prove more interesting if there were more information boards along the way describing plant life for example. The walkers all thought that the expansion of the board walk area further out into the moss would be very attractive.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

The route would be suitable for larger groups as there is clear visibility along the pathway to monitor walkers.

How does this place make you feel?

“At one with nature”; enjoyed the lack of buildings, cars and noise; wide range of nature but surprised at the lack of wildlife; “stimulating”

Would they come back?

“Would come back, especially in nicer weather”

If not, what would they need to consider a return visit?

“The car parking feels isolated and there is a risk of vandalism”, “certainly wouldn’t want to walk on my own”; “more information boards along the way to give you more of an experience”

NNR NAME: CAERLAVEROCK

Date: 22nd August 2007

Group: Walking Works Nithsdale

Route: Castle Wood

Duration of walk: 1 hr

Weather conditions: Clear blue skies

Size of group: 7 plus 1 dog

Composition: All walking group leaders

Level of experience: Representatives from four different health walk group summarised the experience and normal walks of their groups as follows:-

- Kirkconnell group: 1 hour duration walks on tracks but no hills, 1 member infirm
- Dumfries group 1: 1 hour duration walks on pavements
- Lincluden: ¾ hour walks on tracks
- Dumfries group 2: ½ hour duration walks on pavements

Background: Most groups used to very local walks in Dumfries or Kirkconnell, but now have access to minibus and are willing to make trips further afield if appropriate for the groups.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment? Risk assessment was carried out during today's walk

Have you heard of NNRs? Yes

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? Not everyone

Have you been here before? 4 yes, 3 no

Why? Signposting from road, locally well-known attractive spot

Why not? Not aware of it

How did you get here? By car

Did you feel welcome? Yes, sight is well sign-posted, there are good information boards, and the first part of the path is well made

Where would you have looked locally for information you might have needed before coming on the walk? Tourist Information centres, internet.

No one had seen information leaflets. When produced, it was considered that they did not contain appropriate information about walk routes. There is confusion between Caerlaverock NNR and Caerlaverock WWT reserve.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff? No

Did you enjoy it? Yes

Why? The weather!! It was attractive walk, they enjoyed the environment of the wood and coast, there were lots of points of interest and good views. They enjoyed being in a natural environment.

Would it have met the needs of a health walk group? No, not in present state. Some members would not cope with it, therefore it is unsuitable for the whole group.

Was the distance about right?

Length yes

Attractive yes

Could it be varied? (important in order to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities)

There are no options for variations. A circular route is preferred.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

First hard-core section of path is good, the remainder is too wet underfoot, too uneven, with tree roots and other obstacles, boardwalk sections are poorly maintained, uneven and in places broken. The path is narrow with frequent overhanging vegetation including nettles and brambles. Enough width for people to walk side by side is preferred as it is a social event and some members require support with walking. Regular benches are required for these groups to sit, chat and recover.

Was the route suitable for the size of group? (routes need to be safe for the size and abilities)

Yes

Would you come back? Not in present condition

Are you likely to return? When, who with? Walking group leaders would like to return

What did you like particularly about this Reserve? It is close to Dumfries and easily accessible

What aspects do you think need to be improved? See above

Could you recommend this route for people with limited mobility? It is not appropriate for such people

Any other points? Generally, boardwalks are okay, but preferable if there is enough room for people to walk side by side, and hand railing should be installed in places. Kissing gates and styles proof unnegotiable barriers to wheelchair users, pushchairs and pregnant women(!).

NNR NAME: CAIRNSMORE OF FLEET

Date: 12th September 2007

Group: Kirkcudbright (Advanced) Walking group at Cairnsmore of Fleet

Route: Inby route

Duration of walk: 45 minutes

Weather conditions: Sunny and warm

Size of group: 15

Composition: 5 men, 10 women, 1 person using stick

Level of experience: The group has been walking for around 2 years

Background: This group will normally drive no more than 20 minutes from Kirkcudbright, walks are normally around 1 hour on level or gently sloping walks.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment? The group leader carried out a site visit and risk assessment in advance.

Have you heard of NNRs? Most of the group didn't know what an NNR is.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? No one was aware that this is an NNR. There was some confusion with the status of National Scenic Area.

Have you been here before?

Why? 5 of the group had previously visited to walk and for the scenery.

Why not? The remainder of the group were not aware of the existence of the reserve. Found it too far to travel for their normal walks, and had plenty of other walking options closer to Kirkcudbright.

How did you get here? Travel by minibus – 40 minute drive from Kirkcudbright

Did you feel welcome? The visitor centre is currently under construction. It is currently not welcoming. In particular, there is no visitor information.

Where would you have looked locally for information you might have needed before coming on the walk? Tourist Information Office and Gatehouse of Fleet local website.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff? Yes, leader had obtained considerable information from the reserve warden.

Did you enjoy it?

Why? Yes, spectacular views, historical interest, natural environment and particularly the quietness and remoteness were enjoyed.

Would it have met the needs of a health walk group? This walk is on the cusp of being too difficult for a health walk, but at the same time a little short.

Was the distance about right?

Length A little short

Attractive Yes

Could it be varied? (important in order to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities)

There appears only to be one short walk option, but as there is inadequate signposting and no site map, we couldn't be sure.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

The short section of the walk on grass was uneven and caused some difficulties, the cattle grids caused concern to some walkers, boardwalks were even and well maintained. There was no site map and signposting and information on route were poor. Some group members would have liked more information boards, but others thought this would detract from the sense of remoteness.

Was the route suitable for the size of group? (routes need to be safe for the size and abilities) Yes

Would you come back? Yes individually, but not as a walking group.

Are you likely to return? When, who with? There was interest in returning for the opening of the new centre.

What did you like particularly about this Reserve? The quietness and sense of remoteness.

What aspects do you think need to be improved? Provision of site maps and way marking along the route.

Could you recommend this route for people with limited mobility? No, some sections of the route were too difficult.

Any other points? The whole group agreed that any development of the site should not detract from the quietness and remoteness of the site, even if this limited access.

The visitor centre was under construction and all signage and interpretation was at the printers. On talking to the reserve warden, all the recommendations regarding information and signage are in the process of being implemented.

NNR NAME: CLYDE VALLEY WOODLANDS

Date: 24th October 2007

Group: Senior Hoofers from Forth, approx 8 miles away, and "Walk a Little, Live a Lot" co-ordinator.

Route: Falls of Clyde.

Group composition:

8 females and 4 males with age range 19 – 77 years. Health walking experience varied in group – 3 walkers less than two years and 9 walkers 3 –5 years. Most participants walk once a week but some 3 – 5 times per week.

Have you heard of NNRs?

Yes, all walkers were familiar with the term.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve?

The walkers were well aware of the area for walks but were not aware that it had the label of a NNR. This may be explained by the fact that the site had only recently achieved this status on the 25th September.

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

All walkers had visited the site before.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

The co-ordinator was accompanied by an SNH staff member.

How did you get here?

By group minibus.

Did you feel welcome?

The staff in the SWT office were very welcoming.

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

The co-ordinator was very satisfied with the prompt delivery of the information requested from the SWT office and all enquiries were dealt with very well: a very organised service. The group had been twice before so most info was known to the group.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

Yes in regard to booking facilities.

Did you enjoy it?

Great. An especially lovely day to be out on the walk

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

To some degree: it was above the normal level for some because of the stairs.

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

About right – approximately an hour. The walkers were aware of ways in which the walk could be varied but all agreed that it was a beautiful area to be out walking in. The natural beauty of the site meant for a pleasant, sedate walk.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained.

Gradient was a bit much for some walkers. In the rain it might have been slippery. There could perhaps be more railings on some stretches. (The co-ordinator explained that on those stretches subsidence would make it difficult for posts to be placed)

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

The co-ordinator knew of three walks. The duration of the walk could be shortened. There are lots of themes and features. All agreed that there were plenty reasons to come back for many more visits.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

The narrower paths still allow for two walkers to walk side-by-side. The boardwalk section may present some risk to certain groups of walkers.

How does this place make you feel?

Felt good. Glad we came. Pleasant.

Would they come back?

Yes, with friends and family.

Yes, so long as the cars can still come down into the car park. Some walkers were concerned that there may be a change to the current access to New Lanark which would mean they would need to walk up a particularly steep hill to the top car park.

The only consideration they might have for not coming back would be the weather affecting the route.

“It’s always been there – the NNR title doesn’t change that”

NNR NAME: CRAIGELLACHIE

Date: Tuesday 10 July 2007

Meeting point: 14.00 at RDs restaurant, Aviemore with transport provided to the walk start point.

Group: Aviemore Step It Up Highland (also did Abernethy Forest walk)

Route: Yellow all-abilities loop path from NNR entrance tunnel past the first lochan and back.

Duration of walk: 45 mins

Weather conditions: Warm and dry

Size of group:

10 in total (including leaders and assistants).

Composition:

- Four Step It Up Highland walk leaders/assistants: One man and three women.
- Four elderly women including one with severe visual impairments (approx age range late 60s - 70s)
- One man with relative fitness came to the group via Mind (about mid-50s).

Level of experience:

The group has been going for a number of years, with ebbs and flows in activity. Participants are used to doing flat walks at a very modest pace where the walking surface is very even, up to a very maximum of an hour.

Background:

Aviemore Step It Up Highland group has reactivated this summer 2007 and now meets every Tuesday afternoon. The group has a number of committed and experienced helpers who appeared to be well informed in terms of organisational aspects (transport, logistics) and responsive to participants needs. The group have quite a wide recent repertoire, walking at Glen Mhor, Lily Loch (woodland and open moor), Dalraddie and Loch an Eilean, and plan to go to Boat of Garten where one member lives.

Some members are working on confidence building following an accident or due to sight. A couple of elderly regulars were absent, including a blind member who normally uses a guide dog, but when she comes on the walk and is guided by one of the others arms.

Have you heard of NNRs?

Yes, most of the group seemed to have.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? Yes – see below.

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

The Step it Up group had done this route twice before, but starting at the youth hostel. Only 2 of the party had not been to the NNR before as they had been absent during that trip.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

Undertaken by the local Walk Leaders.

How did you get here?

The Badenoch and Strathspey Community Transport Company minibus (carries 8 people) is available to the group each Tuesday between 2pm-4pm. It picked them up at RDs restaurant at 2pm which is their regular meeting point and dropped them off at the walk start about ½ mile away. Due to the age and visual impairment issues of the group, transport is required to the start of even a very local walk. The bus returned at a pre-arranged time (3pm) to the drop off point and took the group back to RDs for tea. Walk assistants used their own cars for those who could not fit in the bus.

Did you feel welcome?

Yes, but the group had visited the site before and were familiar with the area. Some issues were raised about access to and promotion of the site which was felt to be not to be positively encouraged by the Macdonald Centre. If you didn't know it was there and where the entrance was located, it would be hard to find.

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

The group were already familiar with the NNR as they had already walked there previously. The consultant was able to get a Craigellachie NNR leaflet mailed out by the SNH Aviemore office.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

No – there are no staff posted at the site.

Did you enjoy it?

Everyone did. It was commented that the constant A9 traffic noise spoiled it a little. There was one participant who does not like this particular walk for personal reasons and had to be persuaded to come.

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

Yes for most. Although those wanting a longer length of walk felt that the extended option using the red trail was too steep in parts and too challenging a surface/steps.

Was the distance about right?

Mixed response; most people thought it was just about right; 2 participants felt they would have liked a longer walk. There is scope to lengthen but the red route introduces a number of obstacles that the members find off-putting – see below.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

Access prior to underpass

- The approach from the car park/drop off to the underpass is across the playing field grass with no path. The surface is pitted and uneven and the group had to take care in crossing.
- A curving gravel slope has been created prior to underpass and entrance to NNR and surfaced with large stones. This gradient seems to have replaced steps which previously offered a route down the bank. This makes the surface uneven and loose underfoot which was difficult for some, particularly the participant with poor sight who had to be guided. It is not suitable for wheelchair use. There was criticism that the steps had been removed, which some people found easier to use.

Yellow trail

- Surface fine.
- Lack of way markers to identify yellow and red routes. You could easily stray onto the more difficult route if you were not familiar with the trail. A choice of paths can be confusing if there is no directions. There is only board was at the entrance.

Red trail

- a number of obstacles make this route unsuitable for most members at present, even those who would like a longer walk.
- steeper sections are too difficult due to very narrow slippery steps comprising a series of embedded stones – although shallow in height people found it difficult to get a proper foothold as the depth of the steps is small.
- Crossing wide drains is challenging - in particular one double culvert where you have to stand/balance on an uneven boulder in between the 2 drains.

Variety of routes

There is only one route suitable for this group at present. The only variation is to start at the youth hostel or the Macdonald Centre. Participants viewed the former as the main entrance.

For the size of group

Route worked fine for a group of 10 with similar walking speed. One participant seemed to be a little frustrated with the pace and would have liked to go further. However, it was his first time out with the group.

Would you come back?

Possible at some time in future, with the Step It Up group.

What did you like particularly about this Reserve?

It is a walk that could be done in any weather as it is not open and exposed and the tree cover provides some protection.

What aspects do you think need to be improved?

- Access path before the underpass plus route across playing field (i.e. the portion that is not actually within the NNR boundary).
- Signposting to the NNR: the only signs were the interpretive boards at the underpass entrance. There are no direction signs at either the youth hostel or the Macdonald Centre accesses. No-one would guess without prior knowledge that an NNR entrance would be hidden across the other side of a football pitch.
- Way markers for coloured trails.

NNR NAME: FLANDERS MOSS – NO WALK DONE

This walk is on part of the moss called Poldar Moss about two miles from Thornhill travelling on the B822 Thornhill on Kippen road.

The sign at the road side is quite small but the access is good and leads to a car park about half a mile away.

The walkway consists of a level gravel path and solid wooden duckboards for most of the way.

There are frequent information boards and also warning signs pointing out the dangers of straying off the pathway.

The walk is only just over one mile in length so not much of a challenge but would be of more interest to botanists than health walkers.

There are no facilities other than the car park and the dangers of the moss are well highlighted on the warning signs.

NNR NAME: FORVIE

Date: 29 August 2007

Group: Ellon Strollers - NOT a Paths to Health walk group

Route: Red way marked route from Waterside Car Park near Newburgh. Walked as far as Forvie Kirk (ruin)

Duration of walk: 1hr 15 mins.

Weather conditions: Dry, warm, overcast

Level of experience: Group has been going about 6mths. Some members have been walking for several years. They meet every two weeks and have a programme of walks arranged.

Background: Informal group Part of Grampian 50+ network of groups. Most fairly fit (many put this down to their walking regularly). One lady with angina found the walk challenging in terms of the gradient and length but completed it and was pleased with herself.

Size of group: 12 on this occasion

Composition: All were ladies over 50. About ¾ live in Ellon the rest need transport to get to Ellon to meet in the first place.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment? The consultant did it night before. Group do not normally do risk assessments of routes they walk.

Have you heard of NNRs? Yes

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? Yes. Forvie Centre, walks, leaflets, newspaper articles.

Have you been here before? ¾ said they had been there before

Why? Walks, easy to get to by car from Ellon,

Why not? Not got round to it.

How did you get here? The group hired a minibus for this walk. Normally they would share cars or occasionally use public transport. There is a bus service past Waterside Car Park – not from Ellon though.

Did you feel welcome? Yes, scenery, paths, company, quiet

Where would you have looked locally for information you might have needed before coming on the walk?

Very good local library, internet, (no TIC), would think of phoning the Forvie Centre despite it being an SNH office.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff? Only the group leader had done so.

Did you enjoy it? Yes

Why? Fresh air, extra walk in their programme, challenging walk, the story of the bones being uncovered and how it was dealt with. Hearing how to deal with quick sand (concern

that there appears to be an area of quicksand where the red/blue paths emerge onto the beach??).

Dog-friendly area.

Would it have met the needs of a health walk group? Not beginner group, too steep in places, sandy surface not easy for some,

Was the distance about right? Yes

Attractive Yes

Could it be varied? (important in order to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities)

This particular route could only have been extended or shortened. Other options on the reserve are the blue route from the Waterside CP along the edge of the estuary, and first stretch of red/green path from Forvie Centre. All linear. No circular option at present.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained Yes – uneven, soft sand, rabbit holes, potential flooded areas, steepish gradient, steps,

Was the route suitable for the size of group? (routes need to be safe for the size and abilities) Yes, and maybe up to 25 (this is only one person's view)

Would you come back? Yes

Are you likely to return? When, who with?

Group is due back in November to do a walk at Forvie as part of their normal programme

What did you like particularly about this Reserve?

Heather in bloom, fresh air, information (signal) signs.

What aspects do you think need to be improved? This route cannot be realistically improved for the target group, but provision of a circular walk somewhere on the Reserve and more information about the options that are available for health walk group would help

Could you recommend this route for people with limited mobility? No – too uneven.

Any other points?

SNH are considering a linear 700m all-abilities trail from the Forvie Centre – however of a circular route that follows a contour line west from the centre to above the lochan of about 2 miles total length would be of great value to health walk groups.

One lady suggested that it would be helpful to add to the info SNH has produced about all-ability access on the Red route that “great care is needed if have difficulties walking” and not to put in too much detailed information as that can put people off. Helpful to mention if a path is too narrow for two people to walk side by side (that could be the definition of “narrow”).

NNR NAME: GLEN AFFRIC

Date: Wednesday 25 July

Meeting point: 1pm, Muir of Ord library with minibus to Dog Falls Car Park

Group: Muir of Ord Step It Up Highland

Route: Whole of Red route from Dogs Falls Car Park

Duration of walk: 1 hr 15 mins

Weather conditions: Warm and dry

Size of group:

17 in total (including leaders and assistants).

Composition:

- 3 Step It Up Highland walk leaders/assistants:
- 11 walkers
- Step it Up Highland manager, consultant and driver

Level of experience:

The group has been going for a number of years doing walks of around an hour every week. Two walkers from the newly formed Beaully group and two ladies came along as they'd heard about it through others.

Background:

Almost all were in their 50-60s with one visually-impaired walker, not member of M of Ord group.

Have you heard of NNRs?

Yes, most of the group seemed to have.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve?

Most were but 2/3 not aware.

Some knew this as a result of publicity of events in the Glen, by word of mouth, but few had seen the signs.

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

This group had not been here before as a group. Most people had been to Glen Affric but not to walk. Those that hadn't been cited no-one to go with, no transport, new to area, "not got round to it" as reasons

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

Undertaken by a member of Inverness Walk Leaders.

How did you get here?

A 22 seater coach had been hired from Spa Coaches in Strathpeffer. The driver, also happened to be a keen walker.

Did you feel welcome?

Yes, as many had visited before and were familiar with the area.

Where would you have looked locally for information about the NNR?

Local paper, tourist board, internet-walks-area, phone the local FCS office, House of Beauty. Not many had seen any publicity about the NNR. The current leaflet is out of date and due for re publishing very soon.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

Yes, the FCS Ranger met us after the walk for a brief chat.

Did you enjoy it?

Everyone did. It was commented that it was peaceful, change of place to walk, water, trees, everything, scenery, good company.

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

More taxing than usual for some, but most managed okay. Could be a problem for those with knee problems due to steep steps down. Some thought the descent was “dangerous” as narrow and uneven, not able to walk two-abreast if someone needed support. Ascent at start quite hard for some, perhaps 5 mins warming up might have helped.

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

Most people thought it was just about right distance, but several would have liked to stop more often to look at things in more detail. No-one asked for a longer walk although there is scope to lengthen via the yellow route. All found the route very attractive. A shorter walk was possible in that you could turn round at any point. The shorter white walk to viewpoint also an option, although requires same initial climb.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

Surface felt to be good especially after so much recent rain although felt it could be poor in very wet weather. Well-maintained.

Too steep too soon for several walkers, downhill difficult, needed sticks for support.

Very easy to follow once aware of marker posts, perhaps turn down to steps need to be clearer?

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

There are three marked routes from Dog Falls car park, the white and red suitable for fitter health walkers and yellow for next level. Certainly all felt they would return to walk again if possible. One person felt it was too steep/demanding for them and unlikely to walk that route again.

Would you recommend it for people with limited mobility?

Two said no. Other comments - Ok but need for frequent stops and sticks recommended.

Would you come back?

Yes, very likely would come with friends and family and “anyone that would bring us” if transport available.

What did you particularly like about this reserve?

Scenery – especially the river, the drive up the Glen, water, waterfall, ripples, variety of trees,

What aspects do you think need to be improved?

Handrails on parts of steps, passing places on steps, more seating? Picnic area on route itself.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

Allright for up to 20 people, although less than 15 would be ideal.

NNR NAME: GLEN TANAR

Date: Two walks were undertaken - 2nd and 4th July 2007

Group:

2nd July Upper Deeside Walking for Health Group - Bonty Court Aboyne

4th July 2007 Upper Deeside Walking for Health Group - Tarland

Routes:

2nd July The group's route was a linear (there and back) from the main car park to the chapel and beyond to the boundary of NNR but all walk was **outside** the Glen Tanar NNR boundary. 60 mins. About 3 kms. Sunny and dry

4th July The group's route was a circular walk from car park near Glen Tanar house either side of the river through pine woods. 90 mins, 4 miles. Evening walk 7.15-8.45pm. Dry and cool.

Group composition:

2nd July Upper Deeside Walking for Health – Bonty Court, Aboyne Group

2 + 3 leaders (there would have been up to 9 on an “average” day). All women in group plus, the Upper Deeside walking for Health scheme co-ordinator. Of the two group members one was a regular and the other was there for the first time. The leaders often take part in the walks. They regularly walk up to 60mins.

The group is usually mostly made up of residents of Bonty Court sheltered housing unit, but the walks are open to all from the Aboyne area. They meet every Monday morning, with many having been walking up to 3 years and although this was their usual day and time for a health walk many of the usual participants were unable to come as they were going on an outing. Many gave their feedback while the others were walking.

4th July Upper Deeside Walking for Health – Tarland Group

8 (including the Upper Deeside Walking for Health leader Alan Melrose and a staff member from Glen Tanar Ranger Service) two men, six women. They meet every Wednesday evening, many have been walking up to 3 years. Walk up to 90mins. All from Tarland or nearby villages, mixed ages. This was their usual time and day of the week for their walks.

Have you heard of NNRs?:

In both groups, all had heard of NNRs.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve?

2nd July All were aware of Glen Tanar but not that it has NNR status

4th July Some were aware of NNR status, but were not certain.

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

2nd July Most had been to Glen Tanar Estate before for a health walk or a family visit in the past.

4th July Yes, as walking group, with family, and to come fishing. Only one person had never been to Glen Tanar before, no particular reason given.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

Both walks. The health walk group leaders have this route assessed as part of their “suite” of walks.

How did you get here?

Both walks. The group was transported to the NNR in Alan's “Walk Deeside” mini-bus. This was the usual means of transport.

Did you feel welcome?

2nd July Yes, as the Glen Tanar Ranger was there to greet them and was aware the group was coming.

4th July Yes, as there no cars they felt welcome as walkers.

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

2nd July The walk leader already knew the site, but there is very little if any written information available on Glen Tanar. On site there is a fairly old panel and posts indicating the walks. There is a map of walks on the Glen Tanar web site but it is not possible to pick out details of individual walks from this.

4th July The group members would have gone to a TIC (Aboyne nearest). The walk leader already knew the site, but there is very little if any written information available on Glen Tanar. On site there is a fairly old panel and posts indicating the walks.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

2nd July Yes, the Glen Tanar Ranger

4th July Yes, the Project Scotland Glen Tanar Ranger who was on the walk.

Did you enjoy it?

Both Yes

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

Both Yes

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied? See map.

2nd July Distance was fine, attractive area, few variations available. Linear walk could be of any length

Note that the car park is about 1.5kms from the NNR so almost all routes suitable for Health Walk groups are outside the NNR.

4th July Distance for this group was fine, attractive area, few variations available. No other circular walks available to their knowledge within the NNR. Route could have been shorten if just walked there and back along same route.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

2nd July Good surface, few gradients, signed route and well maintained except large puddle right across the track at start – always there apparently!

4th July Good surface, few gradients, well maintained good condition considering amount of rain that had fallen recently.

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

Both Not aware of a great selection – maybe worth checking with the ranger for suggestions.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

2nd July Fine for up to 12 or so as quality of experience drops with more, but route could cope with more.

4th July Fine for up to 30 (!)

Would they come back?

Both: Yes.

What did you like particularly about this Reserve?

2nd July Group were not actually IN the reserve but liked the nature and wildlife.

4th July Well-looked after, paths good, newts.

What aspects do you think need to be improved?

2nd July More information available off-site. More choice, be able to walk from village (4 miles or so).

4th July Refreshments, a bit more information, maybe leaflets.

Sources of local knowledge – people, books, leaflets, web

Walk leader, Glen Tanar Ranger Service, web, no other information. Can there be info available at the Aboyne Community Centre and Tarland newsagents shop?

Walk maps – is info useful to health walk groups?

None apparently available. Many national guidebooks mention walks in and around Glen Tanar but none appear to provide information relevant to health walk groups.

Other notes:

1. The ranger is working on producing some walks leaflets to be made available at the Visitor Centre, most way marked routes from the VC (NOT in NNR) are to be made accessible to wheelchairs in near future.
2. Any promotion of walks in this area should not differentiate between routes outside and those inside the NNR boundary.

NNR NAME: INSH MARSHES

Date: 21st September 2007

Meeting point: The consultant met the group at the reserve car park, then later met up with them again at the Boathouse Restaurant, Loch Insh, to review their walk with them.

Group: The leader and selected members of Inverness walking group (Step it Up Highland).

Route: (Numbers relate to RSPB Insh Marshes trail guide) Meet at car park, walk to Gordonhall hide, then backtrack to car park onto trail, stopping at Info/viewpoint (1), walk to point (3) visiting Invertromie hide *en route*, then back via shortcut route through birch woodland/ heathy grassland to main road (by passing cattle in field) to return to car park. (i.e. group did not undertake longer loop section from (3) to (4)).

Duration of walk: 1.5 hours (1135 – 1300)

Weather conditions: Sun/cloud, moderate SW wind.

Size of group: Four including leader

Composition: Two men (including leader) 2 women

Level of experience: All belong to Step it Up Highland Inverness walking group. Most 60+. This group of 3 plus leader is *atypical* as they comprise the fitter and more able minority of the group, all with walking/ rambling experience. The main group walk every Thursday walk duration 1 – 1 ½ hours (approx. 2 miles). Longer or more difficult walks (like this walk in Insh marshes) take place approx every 3rd Friday approximately for the fitter minority. These longer walks often are in the Cairngorms area.

Background: The larger Inverness group is mixed in terms of health needs. It includes one member who suffers from dementia and another with narcolepsy. It appears that the group members are supportive of each other and value the social networking walking offers, in an atmosphere where the 'right' walking gear is unimportant. (Although the walk leader keeps spare waterproofs and provides walking poles). There appears to be active recruitment via word of mouth with new members coming along each month. Thursday walking group usually meets and finishes at the Floral Hall in Inverness. Other groups include Nairn, Hilton and others. Because the group is sociable they point out the value of using paths where people can walk two abreast chatting. As one lady member pointed it seems less effort as they "go well if they are chatting".

Have you heard of NNRs?

One person out of 4 present said no.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve?

No – all although one person said he was aware he had noticed the area from travelling on the A9.

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

Only to carry out pre-walk Risk assessment (the leader). None of them had been here before as they were unaware of it.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

Walk Leader did it with no help (on standard Paths to Health form) but had experience from a previous job as safety manager. He will be having training on map reading and risk assessment from Step It Up Highland soon.

How did you get here?

Group shared one private car from Inverness. Journey length was 130 miles return. It is clearly a sore point with the group that they do not have easy access to a minibus (currently applying for Lottery funds) which may encourage others to come out.

Did you feel welcome?

The group pointed out that there was nobody there to make them feel welcome, but lots of documentation (i.e. leaflets and information board) at the car park was very good coupled with the beautiful surroundings made the site itself welcoming. They felt that the professional members 'school teachers and nurses' in the walking group welcome 'lots of documentation'. This slightly conflicts with their statement later which shows that most do not bother to read up on a site before they travel there, and one member had to be reminded by another during the questions that there was indeed an information board at the car park .

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

No – they relied on their group leader who normally provides a bit of background to the walks he takes them on, and he always carried out a site 'recce' on any new walks first. One member mentioned though that he might think of seeking out information from the local tourist office.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

No reserve staff present (not informed of visit)

Did you enjoy it?

A resounding 'yes' from all members of the group – 'very enjoyable' 'a really super walk'.

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

As (fitter) individuals – yes, but for the majority of their Inverness (less able walkers) group - no. Only the most able members could do the route that includes the bird hides. There was some disagreement whether if the hides were avoided the route would be acceptable for less able walkers. There remains the issue of high steps and loose stones. The route lacked a wide enough path where walkers could walk side by side (See also Q4 comments). At some sections there is a marked drop along one side of the path which some would find intimidating. The walk leader and another member (retired farmer) pointed out that loose cattle grazing the field for the return loop would be off-putting (hence the group avoided this section by walking back along the road). All noted the path down to the Invertromie hide was very hazardous.

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

Just the right length (the consultant dissuaded them from doing a longer route lasting 2 ½ hours suggested initially by the walk leader). All were enthusiastic about the varied nature of the route and the trees, as the open birch woodland was 'quite different from Inverness' (i.e. conifer plantations).

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

(See also responses to Q15 above). Loose stones, steps very high, exposed trees roots throughout along trails. The steep gradient to the Invertromie hide was too hazardous. The dirt track by Invertromie farm is potentially too slippery. Maintenance of footpaths was generally perceived as good other than the poor section to Invertromie hide. The group agreed it would have been out of character to have it 'like a pavement' as it was a 'country

walk'. In general way marking was seen as good and easy to follow apart from confusing sign posting by the church and (4) by the meteorological station in the meadow area.

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

Yes, the group liked the variety of routes and based on what they experienced would like to revisit this site. However they agree this is not a site for all abilities – only able walkers = the less able would have to be watched more carefully than usual. The distance from Inverness is a constraint. They enjoyed the hides especially as a feature of interest “excellent” ‘clean and nice’ ‘very well maintained hides’. The information and viewpoint hide was particularly appreciated.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

This trail would be no good for the usual size of walking group (15 – 20) mainly due to transport issues as the group prefers to travel longer distances with 2 private cars (9 people max.)

What words come to mind when you think back on this walk/ how would you describe it?

The group noted that the sun shining had made a huge difference and were obviously struck by the scenic beauty of the site. ‘when the wind blows the trees and the noise are attractive’. The excellent views were commented on especially from the viewpoint at (3). It was described as ‘a most attractive walk’ and the varied terrain – the up and down nature of the paths, had added to the pleasure, as the difficulty was not seen as prolonged. Another commented on the variety of the landscapes, with the patchy nature of the open birch woodland, and the agricultural land adjacent.

Would they come back?

A resounding ‘yes’ to this - and one member said she would recommend it to other members of her family. Another noted that it would be good to visit at different times of year for seasonal interest. However they noted that 6 or so of their group would not consider this site because of the difficult terrain.

If not, what would they need to consider a return visit?

Not applicable, but the long drive is an issue – they would not go any further south than Newtonmore.

NNR NAME: KIRKCONNELL FLOW - NO WALK TOOK PLACE

On a visit to assess the suitability of Kirkconnell Flow NNR for health walking group visits the researcher identified that:

The "Floating Road" path is very uneven with significant gaps between logs and lots of loose branches on the path surface.

This path is completely unsuitable for a health walking group.

The "Short Path" route presents a number of hazards including uneven path surface, narrow path and over-hanging vegetation, making it difficult for health walking groups.

The walk takes 20 - 30 minutes to complete. It is therefore unsuitable for the purposes of a health walking group seeking around 60 minutes exercise.

NNR NAME: KNOCKAN CRAG

Date: 4th September 2007

Group: Ullapool Walking Group – Step it Up Highland and Healthways.

Route taken: From car park to Rock Room along red/yellow/blue route to Poetry Quarry on red/yellow to First contact and return via yellow/blue route.

Duration of walk: 20 mins (would have been a bit longer but midges were TOO much!).

Weather conditions: Drizzle, overcast, no wind

Level of experience: Participants have been walking as a group for about 18 months for about 1 hour around Ullapool. Group has a core of regulars with a new few people joining in once in a while. They have only one regular leader and one other leader, who works in Leisure Centre and only available every couple of weeks or so. This makes it difficult for them to have walks of differing levels, and limits new members joining.

Background: All from Ullapool itself and use cars very little. One lady used to work at Knockan when there was a visitor centre. One lady was waiting for hip operation and walked with two sticks, another had had two new knees recently and found she needed a lot of support on the steps.

Size of group: 8 on this occasion and regularly anything up to 12, one lady couldn't come today as she cannot be away for more than an hour.

Composition: On this occasion all over 50, two men and six women. (plus a walk leader from Step it Up Highland, SNH staff, the group leader and the consultant)

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment? A Step it Up Highland leader carried it out.

Have you heard of NNRs? Not the term NNR but yes to National Nature Reserves – in publicity and in respect to Knockan.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? Yes, but commented that the name was different from the old days! Knockan Rock.

Have you been here before? Most folk had, one lady not

Why? With friends, to car park area only, to walk

Why not? Not got round to it.

How did you get here? Minibus driven by Jim the leader

Did you feel welcome? Yes because quite a few people there, information readily available once there.

Where would you have looked locally for information you might have needed before coming on the walk? TIC in Ullapool, Ceilidh Place, SNH staff, Ullapool News, Seafront info board.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff? Was an SNH member of staff in Rock Room when we got there who some people spoke to.

Did you enjoy it? Yes.

Why? It was a change from the usual walks round Ullapool. Views, scenery, a bit different from usual. Bus trip. Lots of information.

Would it have met the needs of a health walk group? No

Was the distance about right?

Length Too short for the length of drive

Attractive Yes, very.

Could it be varied? (important in order to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities)

Only by extending walk along the red route – and returning same way – or doing blue loop again.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

Uneven surface in places, open drains to step over, very high steps with uneven surfaces. Even the more able of the group needed to take the steps very carefully. No corresponding colour codes on paths with colours on the maps. Well maintained. Some would ensure they have walking stick with them if they return,

Was the route suitable for the size of group? (routes need to be safe for the size and abilities)

Yes, up to 14 max.

Would you come back? Yes

Are you likely to return? When, who with? Yes – same group to return in the autumn. And would come back in own time now know more about it.

What did you like particularly about this Reserve? Well signposted, great views, information available, clean toilets, good parking for the bus, vegetation, being up high seeing views from different perspective. Liked wildness.

What aspects do you think need to be improved? Better signing of the routes once on them, cover open drains, hand rails on steps,

Could you recommend this route for people with limited mobility? No. There's a need for information to make it clear that the route is not suitable for less able.

Any other points?

Advise go out of midge time! Need to be pretty mobile to do steps.

The group leader said there is no need to go to Knockan when have Ullapool Hill path. Unlikely to go more than 1-2 year as a group.

NNR NAME: LOCH FLEET

Date: Two walks were undertaken here on **2nd July 2007 and 18th September 2007**

Group: **Walks 1, 2nd July and Walk2, 18th Sept** - Golspie ladies (and one man), from keep fit group.

Route: Walk 1 on 2nd July: linear from car park through Balblair wood to cottage at GR NH800973, 3.5km return

Walk 2, on 18 Sept: circular on dunes from Littleferry car park, about 1 km

Duration of walk: 2nd July = 1 ¼ hrs, and 18 Sept = 40 mins

Weather conditions: **Walk 1, 2nd July.** Dry, warm, calm. **Walk 2, 18th Sept.** Dry, cold, overcast.

Size of group:

Walk 1, 2nd July. 13 (including leaders and the consultant) **Walk 2, 18th Sept.** Five walkers and five others(see below)

Composition: Walk 1, 2nd July. Eight ladies from the local keep fit class, two leaders from Tain's Step it Up Highland walk and the consultant.

Walk 2, 18th Sept, 5 ladies from Golspie, the consultant, two leaders from Tain, the Step it Up Highland co-ordinator, and the local Highland Council Ranger.

Level of experience:

Walk 1. Varied, most were fairly fit non-walkers

Walk 2. Varied, most walked around the village or had walked more in the past.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment? The consultant carried out both risk assessments.

Have you heard of NNRs? **Walk 1, 2nd July.** Not really, vaguely. **Walk 2, 18th Sept.** Most said yes.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? **Both groups.** Yes, had seen signs, through involvement in local bird group.

Have you been here before? **Both:** most had been to the reserve.

Why? Family walks, walking dogs, Ranger led walk, beach is often out of the wind, visiting friends

Why not? New to the area, not got round to it yet.

How did you get here? Both walks: there was a lift with the community minibus. No public transport is available.

Did you feel welcome? **Walk 1, 2nd July.** Definite yes. **Walk 2, 18th Sept.** Group less sure what this meant – car park serves its purpose although not well signed, Is there a map of the area on the new panel? New panel not obvious.

Where would you have looked locally for information you might have needed before coming on the walk? Walk 1 2nd July. SNH office, Highland Council service point, post office, Chemist **Walk 2, 18th Sept.** TIC in Dunrobin Castle, info board in village.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff? No although several had friends who knew staff or the local ranger.

Did you enjoy it? Walk 1, 2nd July. Yes. **Walk 2, 18th Sept.** Mostly yes although one lady not able to enjoy the scenery as had to look at the ground all the time.

Would it have met the needs of a health walk group? Walk 1, 2nd July. Allright for most, uneven surface track a problem for some. **Walk 2, 18th Sept.** With reservations – need for sticks for some, walking surface too uneven.

Was the distance about right? Walk 1, 2nd July.. Yes for most, a bit long due to uneven surface for one or two, many could have walked further **Walk 2, 18th Sept.** Yes

Attractive Walk 1, 2nd July. & Walk 2, 18th Sept. Yes, very pleasant. 2. Especially in the spring/summer with flowers in dunes.

Could it be varied? (important in order to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities) Walk 1, 2nd July. Limited variations except could walk a bit further along main track and one up to Kirkton (out of NNR). Circular routes is indicated on maps but through narrow line in wet, grass along side loch to meet track at bridge.

Walk 2, 18th Sept. Length and choice of routes could be varied easily, but surface will always be too uneven for many.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained? Walk 1, 2nd July. Surface a bit uneven and several large muddy and wet patches. Level gradient much appreciated. Easy to follow although not signed except at start.

Walk 2, 18th Sept. Surface too uneven and unpredictable, gradients okay, although there are several routes possible, people would have liked one circular route to be signed from the car park to give confidence are on an okay route.

Was the route suitable for the size of group? (routes need to be safe for the size and abilities)

Walk 1, 2nd July and walk 2, 18th Sept. Yes – okay up to 20 if two+ leaders

Would they come back?

Walk 1, 2nd July. and walk 2, 18th Sept. Yes

Are you likely to return? When, who with?

Walk 1, 2nd July and walk 2, 18th Sept. Yes – but need for transport from village and path from village

What did you like particularly about this Reserve?

Walk 1, 2nd July. Quiet, birds, flowers, wildlife, views across Loch Fleet

Walk 2, 18th Sept. Peaceful, birds, fresh air, flowers, views, butterflies

What aspects do you think need to be improved?

Walk 1, 2nd July. Seats by the bridge and water's edge (use fallen trees), surface needs levelling/graded, keep vegetation cut back in summer. Way marking at each path junction.

Walk 2, 18th Sept. Car park to be better signed, panel in more obvious position (or restrict cars from parking in front of it), low key signing of one route. (Benches mentioned by the leaders but not the walkers)

Could you recommend this route for people with limited mobility?

Walk 1, 2nd July and walk 2, 18th Sept. Not really, a bit uneven.

Any other points?

The NNR leaflet would be more use if showed connecting routes in and out of the NNR.

The group appreciated getting copies of NNR leaflet – few if any had seen it before.

(Not in NNR but Balblair Wood Route shown in Golspie Walks booklet very difficult to follow after the cottage. Vegetation needs clearing and route way marked)

Other contacts: The local physiotherapist at Lawson, arranges cardiac rehabilitation classes. The local Health visitor/Community nurse based at Golspie Health Centre (01408 633880) would be interested to know when another walk happens and she will think about folk who might like to take part in that walk or a programme of walks.

The writer who put together the Golspie Walks booklet, might be available to produce route maps for health walks in Golspie.

Owners of “Coffee Bothy” in village car park interested in promoting walks and being a focal point for groups and walking and mountain biking in the village.

Step it Up Highland have suggested a participatory event in the Lairg/Golspie/Dornoch area later this year to see how best to set up a walking group and find out barriers to people joining such a group and getting out walking at this level. Highland Council ranger service is interested in being involved.

NNR NAME: LOCH LEVEN

Date: 14th August 2007

Meeting point: The consultant met the group at 11.45 then met them after the walk at 13.15. Discussion took 40 minutes, during refreshments at the Boathouse Bistro, Kinross by Loch Leven.

Group: Perth & Kinross *Stride for Life* group and the Stride for Life co-ordinator and the local Perth and Kinross Council Countryside ranger). This group follows a regular programme of walks in the Perth area every Tuesday and has a printed walking programme available to download from www.liveactive.co.uk.

Route: On the new Loch Leven Heritage Trail on the western shore of Loch Leven starting from the angling centre by the pier going north via Kirkgate Park past Kinross House gardens to the first waterside bird hide, then return along the same route. This route ran within or just alongside the NNR boundary.

The initial part of the trail from Kinross to Pow Burn is now open. Further sections are to be added (Levenmouth to Vane Farm autumn '07. The trail will eventually encircle the Loch.

Duration of walk: 1 hour 20 mins.

Weather conditions: overcast, light breeze

Size of group: 15 plus two leaders

Composition: 13 women, two men; estimate 50 years +

Level of experience:

All members of Stride for Life (six months – two years, with two recent 'novices'). The group meets to walk every Tuesday in the Perth area.

Background: all retired, local to Perth area.

Have you heard of NNRs?: Yes (all)

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? All yes

Have you been here before? Why, why not? 9 of the 15 (60% of group) had visited the site before (the castle). The remainder were not aware of the walk.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

The countryside ranger carried out a risk assessment the previous day using a Perth and Kinross Council format

How did you get here?

The group was transported to the NNR in a Perth & Kinross Council mini-bus

Did you feel welcome?

Yes

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

No, found out on arrival (some collected leaflets from the numerous leaflet dispensers at the Bistro before they set off). The walk programme had changed as this was meant to be a picnic day in The Hermitage. As far as the group were concerned it was a 'mystery' walk.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

No

Did you enjoy it?

All a resounding yes!.

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

Yes

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

Normally prefer to walk further. Walks usually last between 1 -1.5 hours. This walk lasted 1 hour 20 minutes as they had a number of interpretive stops for information from the countryside ranger. It was an attractive route with lots of variety.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

The surface was very good, easy. The changes in surface between board walk (at the start) and cinder path (most of route) caused no problems.

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

The group felt a good selection of routes was available, with a number of features of interest – the loch (water was seen as especially interesting on a walk), wildlife, Kinross House, and the bird life (although having binoculars would have helped with the latter at the hide). The route will be particularly appealing once the circular route around the loch is completed.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

Group of 16 (capacity of minibus) was fine. Sometimes with larger group sizes they bring their own cars.

What words come to mind when you think back on this walk/ how would you describe it?

Flat, water, picturesque, sky line, graveyard by Kinross House garden interesting, educational (Kinross House), pleasant, peaceful, wildlife. One member summed it up with “a picturesque easy walk for all ages”.

Would they come back?

100 % yes.

If not, what would they need to consider a return visit?

n/a

NNR NAME: LOCH LOMOND (BALMAHA)

Date: 27th September 2007

Meeting point:

Group: Health Walk Group from Dumbarton and West Dunbartonshire Co-ordinator.

Group composition: 13 females - all retired. Health Walking experience – 12 walkers with 3-5 years experience; 1 walker not less than one year's experience.

Have you heard of NNRs?

Yes, all walkers familiar with the term

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve?

All aware.

Have you been here before? Why, why not?

No – didn't know it was there as a route

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

Co-ordinator as the countryside ranger(one in the same!) carried it out.

How did you get here?

By group minibus

Did you feel welcome?

No contact with site staff

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

Again, the leader and countryside ranger knew all about the area.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

Today – no staff encounters.

During the walk

Did you enjoy it?

Yes – was a great day to be out walking on. Perfect autumn day in the woodland

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

Group would be happier walking for longer as they are very experienced – still pleasant and nice to be somewhere different.

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

Although the walk was of health walk duration (45 mins) the group wanted to walk for longer. All enjoyed the bird spotting and encounters with other walkers.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

Had no difficulties at all. Asides from some water logged sections the paths were well maintained. "ideal walk in this area despite the slight path unevenness and small inclines"

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

Co-ordinator knew of several other options – indeed the group decided that they wanted to do another walk around the loch side after the survey was carried out. Duration of the walk

could be shortened or lengthened depending on the group of walkers. Lots of themes and features – mostly birdlife, wildlife.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

The narrower paths still allow for two walkers to walk side-by-side. Still opportunities for walking on your own.

How does this place make you feel?

Beautiful, gorgeous, peaceful, restful. So handy from Dumbarton but far enough to feel as though you're away. Beautiful place, lucky to be here.

Would they come back?

Yes because of the above.

If not, what would they need to consider a return visit?

n/a

NNR NAME: MUIR OF DINNET

Date: 2 July 2007

Meeting point: Logie Coldstone village hall, after afternoon walk.

Group: Logie Coldstone group of Upper Deeside Walking for Health

Route: The group's route was a linear (there and back) from the main Burn O' Vat car park to Meikle Kinord House on A93, all within NNR

Duration of walk: 60 mins. About 3 kms.

Weather conditions – Sunny, dry

Size of group: 7

Composition: 2 men, 5 women

Level of experience:

Meet every Monday afternoon, many have been walking up to 3 years. Regularly walk over 60mins.

Background: All from Logie Coldstone area

Have you heard of NNRs?: Yes

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? All yes. Seen signs.

Have you been here before? Why, why not? Yes.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment?

The health walk group have this route assessed as part of their "suite" of walks.

How did you get here?

The group was transported to the NNR in the "Walk Deeside" mini-bus.

Did you feel welcome?

No comment except would have been more welcoming if Visitor centre was open.

Did you find out the information you needed before coming?

Yes – recent Cairngorms leaflet and local knowledge

Have you spoken with any NNR staff?

No

Did you enjoy it?

Yes

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group?

Yes

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied?

Distance was fine, attractive area, a few variations are available.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained

Good surface, few gradients, signed routes and well maintained. Some ground is a bit uneven due to trees roots and large stones. Could be a bit muddy/wet after prolonged rain.

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

Yes. Interestingly this NNR is linked to Cambus O' May Forest where FCS have developed several all-ability trails. Although the all ability trails are a mile or so west of the NNR there is a link route from Burn O' Vat Car park and signed by Upper Deeside Access Trust (UDAT)

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities.

Fine for up to 10 or so as quality of experience drops with more, but route could cope with more. Limited by capacity of minibus

Sources of local knowledge – people, books, leaflets, web

Lots of references in walks books and a leaflet (£1) is available, panels at car parks, Forest education Initiative web site – out of date. Visit Deeside and UDAT web sites

Walk maps – is info useful to health walk groups?

Limited – info for health walks to be produced in near future

Would they come back?

Yes

What did you like particularly about this Reserve?

Quite, peaceful, varied environment and walks, scenery, plant life, all

What aspects do you think need to be improved?

Leave as it is – except open the visitor centre.

NNR NAME: ST ABBS HEAD

Date: 10th September 2007

Group: Borders Walk It

Route taken: The start of the cliff top walk, then to the loch and return by the road.

Duration of walk: 2 hours guided walk, would have been 1 hour if just walked.

Weather conditions: Sunny, but with strong northerly wind

Size of group: 3

Composition: All walk leaders

Level of experience: 5 years involvement in Paths to Health

Background: Normally a group of 6/7 people walking for 1 ½ hours weekly.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment? A risk assessment had been carried out at a previous visit

Have you heard of NNRs? yes

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? yes

Have you been here before?

Why? Yes, one previous visit to enjoy the coastline

Why not?

How did you get here? By car, 1 ½ hours drive

Did you feel welcome? Very welcome both by the information available in the car park and visitor centre and by the warden.

Where would you have looked locally for information you might have needed before coming on the walk? More information in advance about the suitability of paths was required. They would have looked on the internet for this. (but didn't)

Have you spoken with any NNR staff? Yes, a guided walk was arranged

Did you enjoy it?

Why? Yes

Would it have met the needs of a health walk group? Not for everyone in the group

Was the distance about right?

Length Yes

Attractive Yes

Could it be varied? (important in order to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities)

A range of routes were possible

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained Some sections of the path were a little uneven, narrow and there were a few steep sections. More benches could be provided, particularly in areas more sheltered from the wind.

Was the route suitable for the size of group? (routes need to be safe for the size and abilities) Yes

Would you come back? Leaders would return, but not with groups

Are you likely to return? When, who with?

What did you like particularly about this Reserve? There is lots of natural interest, there is enough here for a whole day, having a guided walk added to the interest.

What aspects do you think need to be improved? There was a discussion about whether it is appropriate to upgrade paths to all-ability trails and whether this would detract from the natural environment.

Could you recommend this route for people with limited mobility? No

Any other points? More people had been invited to join this walk but didn't turn up. It was surmised by those present that some were put off either by the distance to drive or a perception that the walk would be too difficult.

Having toilets and a café at the visitor centre is a big bonus for this type of group.

The reserve leaflet is good, interesting clear and contains a good map.

NNR NAME: ST. CYRUS

Date: 26th September 2007

Meeting point: at St Cyrus NNR Visitor Centre car park. The group was an atypical one as no formal health walk groups are currently operating in this area under the Paths to Health scheme. This group represented an older group who had formed a regular walking group for mainly social reasons. For future contacts for groups walking for health, it should be noted that there is no doctors' surgery in St Cyrus – the nearest are in Montrose (Angus) and Inverbervie (Aberdeenshire)

Group: Thirteen members of the Inverbervie walking group and the countryside ranger, from Aberdeenshire Council.

Route: St Cyrus Visitor Centre to fishing bothy via beach and return along the track to the back of the dunes. This includes the route marked for disabled access. This is indicated to top of dunes via a wooden pedestrian bridge although the bridge board walkway is narrow (1m or less wide) and cannot take two people abreast except in short sections (which have simple benches available).

Duration of walk: 1 hour (1040 – 1140)

Weather conditions: Sunny, cold with moderate northerly wind

Size of group 13 plus walk leader

Composition 11 women, three men (including walk leader), one dog

Level of experience All able and active walkers walking within the Montrose area (i.e. not set up as a Health walking group *per se*). The Stepping Out group walks every 2nd Tuesday. Two women from this group also walk regularly every Tuesday with the Laurencekirk (Mearns area) 50+ walking group. Average walk length is 6 miles occasionally 8 miles walking at 3 miles an hour.

Background The Stepping Out group was set up 1 year ago. The Laurencekirk group has been going for 10 years. 1 new walker was in the group for the walk. All members are retired apart from one working.

Have you heard of NNRs? Yes (100% of group)

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? Yes (100% of group)

Have you been here before? Why, why not? All the group had been here before apart from one member of the group who was visiting from Australia.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment? Carried out by the consultant and the Aberdeenshire Council countryside ranger using standard health walks and Aberdeenshire Council risk assessment formats (combined).

How did you get here? 4 private cars used (2 individuals came on foot from St Cyrus)

Did you feel welcome? Yes – the information on site and the informality were appreciated

Did you find out the information you needed before coming? As the group members knew the site already they felt there was no need. The organiser had explained the walk

arrangements with the rest of the group. One member who lives locally knows the site very well.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff? No. They felt no need as time was limited and 'didn't feel we were coming for a nature walk'. They are aware there are other opportunities to do as guided walks by NNR staff are offered via adverts in the local papers.

Did you enjoy it? Yes - all

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group? Yes. One new member felt a bit exposed to wind on the beach which was in her face on the outward walk. Weather was perceived as a major influence on enjoyment. It was suggested if the loop walk was done in the reverse direction the wind would have been behind the group on the beach section of the walk.

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied? The group would have preferred a longer walk but they agreed that for 'first timers' (and therefore more 'typical' Health walkers) it would have been fine. They would be interested in other options to extend the walk along the beach then back. They enjoyed the variety of things to stop and see and the graveyard site was mentioned as a point of interest.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained One person did not like walking on sand although found the walk today fine as the sand was firmer than usual. The rabbit holes were mentioned as something to be aware of. Gradient was easy as there were no steep sections and the path surface was acceptable with a maintained surface. It was viewed as an easy route to follow as 'you can't go anywhere else'.

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest Yes the site was seen as having sufficient interest to encourage return visits. To cater for all abilities the group walks as fast as the slowest member, and this is seen as fine if everyone is prepared for this. The main interest is seen as the social group walking in convivial company. The birds and sea were also mentioned as well as interesting pieces of flotsam on the beach.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities. This met the usual requirements for the walkers. The maximum group size for the Inverbervie walking group is 15. The Laurencekirk group of 50 is split into groups of 30 each (maximum) by route or length of walk.

What words come to mind when you think back on this walk/ how would you describe it? The group offered 'diverse' 'picturesque', 'scenic', 'interesting', 'easy', 'breezy- healthy', 'refreshing' .

Would they come back? Yes – all and at any time of year. The only bar to a visit would be a sea haar. Otherwise the group felt it would be interesting at any time of year especially as the 'sea changes and is different every time'. Interest is all year round but for best May – July for dune flora.

If not, what would they need to consider a return visit? n/a

NNR NAME: TAYNISH

Date: 25th September 2007

Meeting point: Taynish NNR car park. This is in a remote area of Argyll and Bute with the nearest small village of Tayvallich approximately 1.7 km away, while the nearest significant settlement Lochgilphead is 17km distant. There are currently no Paths to Health walking schemes operating in this area, so this 'one off' walking group was organised via a local contact. This was co-organised and the walk co-led by the Taynish Reserve Manager based in the SNH area office at Lochgilphead.

Group: Mixed ability (mental health plus one person in wheelchair) patient group from Argyll & Bute Hospital, Lochgilphead 10 including supervisors, the group leader, the Reserve manager and an SNH staff member

Route: Car park to Taynish Mill return (wheelchair accessible Mill path route)

Duration of walk: 1.5 hours (11.00 – 12.30)

Weather conditions: Sun/ cloud with moderate – brisk NE wind

Size of group: 10 including 1 walk leader and 1+ hospital support staff.

Composition: Two women, eight men (one person in a motorised wheelchair)

Level of experience None - although Lochgilphead Hospital offers informal walks, not Paths to Health style ones

Background Group comprised patients with psychiatric disorders based at Lochgilphead hospital – with a mix of short term and long term residents. Some members of the group took part enthusiastically in the discussion while a few others remained quiet. The group began to lose interest in the questions/ discussion towards the end of the questionnaire.

Have you heard of NNRs? 5 of the group (50%) said they had.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? 3 out of the 10 said they were aware of it.

Have you been here before? Why, why not? 2-3 said they had. The rest had not because of access and transport issues, and lack of information. Some of the hospital residents were from Dunoon and Campbeltown so they did not live locally. Comments included that the NNR was "way out of the way of the hospital" or "don't know its here". They pointed out there was no information or signs about the NNR on any of the main roads leading to the site. This did spark a discussion on whether they would have wanted better site promotion. Too much would lead to "too many people traipsing around". Hugh Fife the group leader suggested there are other kinds of networks to share information. In this context he acted as a conduit demonstrating a "way of networking and enablement" where he could provide encouragement and motivation to the group to visit the site. Otherwise it would have been a question of luck rather than design to find the NNR.

Was there help with carrying out a risk assessment? The SNH Reserve manager carried out the risk assessment using the SNH format, with no other support.

How did you get here? Two cars from the hospital

Did you feel welcome? Yes – because of the place and also because the reserve manager was there to welcome the group. The group was pleased to have a guided walk because the group valued expert input which added value to the walk and made it more appealing - “..a guided walk is a good idea because you can ask questions”...”disnae just make it a walk then”.

On the day of the visit there were workmen carrying out maintenance on the mill path which some of the group could have found off-putting, but were no problems.

Did you find out the information you needed before coming? No – the group arrived ‘cold’. An NNR DVD was available but the group leader did not think there was any point in showing it, although some people did ask him about the visit beforehand.

Interestingly it was noted by some of the group that more people would have come if they had known it was an easy walk, so people’s preconceived perceptions influenced the decision to take part.

Have you spoken with any NNR staff? Yes – the Reserve manager and walk leader.

Did you enjoy it? Yes – all did. Some members of the group were very enthusiastic – “thoroughly enjoyable”, “total freedom, tranquillity, enjoyed the view”. “Very much, very pleasant’. In fact the ‘fantastic’ view was commented on a number of times. One member was apparently singing happily for most of the walk! Three people had commented during the walk on the air quality “when you are in the woods it smells completely different”. “A rich smell and by the sea”.

Did it meet your needs as a health walk group? More than expected. Comments included that it was beneficial health wise because it was beautiful and the fresh air was great for the appetite. The comment on the fresh air was surprising as the air quality is probably little different from Lochgilphead – the woodland setting seemed to influence this perception, and encouraged deep breaths when walking. The group leader commented on how the setting seemed to stimulate usually sedentary patients – one member walked up big steps to the waterfall ‘like a goat’.

Was the distance about right? Length, attractive, could it be varied? All the group felt the 400 m all abilities route was not long enough and “would have liked it to continue”. One group member suggested the all-abilities Mill trail route should be connected to the long woodland trail track as a circular walk is preferred, but the reserve manager said that the terrain did not make this option feasible. They liked the variety along the path as this kept everyone motivated, and the surface was easily walked. They would welcome more opportunities for self-guided trails with more lookout points although some had not noticed interpretive panel at the mill. The mill itself was enjoyed for its human interest. The mill was currently fenced off although one commented that he would have liked a railed walkway through the mill site to explore it better and to get a different perspective on it.

Were there any difficulties in terms of walking surface, gradients, ease to follow, well maintained One member of the group had a more limited experience because of he was confined to a wheel chair and so could not access the waterfall. Despite its label as an all abilities path he commented that the final access to the beach at the far end of the route was too steep for a wheelchair to negotiate without help. The Reserve manager noted that there were plans to improve wheelchair access to the shore.

Although the path was found to be flat and easy most of the way, it was rocky in sections, and winding and more exposed at the far end by the shore. The track to the waterfall (leading off the all-abilities route) was difficult but the group ‘coped’ with it. The person using

the wheelchair said the path needs to be more than 1 m wide to allow 2 or more people to stay abreast of each other, and the group discussed the pros and cons in terms of cost and impacts on the environment.

Variety of routes – to encourage return visits, cater for all abilities, features of interest

the group welcomed the variety along the all abilities route, although reiterated that it would be better to do a circular route. Someone suggested a bird hide accessible for wheelchair users would be good. Another suggested a raised walkway to improve the view. The Reserve manager pointed out that groups could phone the SNH office to clear vehicle access to the sheds further down the main track for access to this area although there is no formally designated parking space here. However the group discussed how improving the accessibility of the track in this area may spoil the walk and surroundings for others.

For the size of group – group sizes vary, routes need to be safe for the size and abilities. The group felt any group size greater than 10 would be too big and felt a smaller group size would have given them more chance to see wildlife, but the effect of the group size was influenced by the group composition.

What words come to mind when you think back on this walk/ how would you describe it?

“Quite nice”, “fantastic”, “contrasts..good variety”, “smells”“old trees give you a different feeling”
(see also descriptions in answer to Q13)

Would they come back? Yes.

If not, what would they need to consider a return visit? The comment was made by a group member that some residents at the hospital did not want to come when they hear about a ‘woodland walk’. They may have had preconceived ideas that it would be too far or too hard a walk. A promotional DVD was suggested (the reserve manager says he has just had one made) to offer to show hospital residents to spark an interest and provide more information.

Constraints for potential walkers visiting this NNR from Lochgilphead hospital includes the time it takes to get ready in the morning, and limited access to suitable outdoor clothing for hospital residents.

Seasonality may affect return visits. Midges in summer may be a deterrent. Oak woodlands are particularly attractive in spring and autumn.

NNR NAME: TENTSMUIR – NO WALK UNDERTAKEN

It did not prove possible to set up and review a health walk at Tentsmuir NNR. This is disappointing as the site has excellent potential for Paths to Health walking schemes. The path surfaces are flat and have been assessed for DDA compliance (pers. Comm. SNH Reserve Manager April '07). The site is situated approx 1.5 miles from Tayport accessible by foot along forestry tracks/ the foreshore, or by car. Larger settlements in the potential 'walking catchment' for Tentsmuir include Cupar, St Andrews and Dundee.

A number of possible circular or 'there and back' routes are available both around Morton Lochs, or within the forest and foreshore area of the Tentsmuir reserve. There are parking facilities for coach/ minibus/ cars, plus toilet facilities by the Forestry Commission car park at Kinshaldy Beach and also more limited spaces at the car park for Morton lochs off the B945.

Morton Lochs offers all abilities paths and bird hides, and there are interpretive panels at both Morton Lochs and Kinshaldy.

Currently there are no Paths to Health programmes operating in this area. The previous Paths to Health officer confirmed that the St Andrews and Cupar health walk programmes are closed. The Paths to Health current focus within Fife is to develop their Health Walks programme on south side in areas of deprivation. Despite repeated attempts, no response was received from the local co-ordinator for Bums Off Seats programme for Fife or the coordinator administrative contact. Looking further afield, the Perth & Kinross Stride for Life group) has walked at Tentsmuir before (August 2006). However when approached about doing so again, the group was not willing to travel so far and already had a fully committed programme.

Other possible contacts tried included Fife Coast & Countryside rangers, with no response, and the FC recreational ranger (based in Fetterdale).

NNR NAME: NO SPECIFIC NNR

Date: 23rd August 2007

Group: Castle Douglas group, Stewartry Walking for Health

Route taken: Lover's Walk, Castle Douglas

Duration of walk: 1 hr

Weather conditions: Clear blue skies!!

Size of group: 8 plus 1 dog

Composition: 2 walking group leaders, 6 group members, all female, mostly fairly healthy, 1 recent heart by-pass

Level of experience: All active with the group for between 6 months and 2 years

Background: The group had declined to do a walk on an NNR, preferring local routes.

Have you heard of NNRs? Most not aware what this means, confusion between NNRs, WWT, NTS, RSPB etc.

Were you already aware of this Nature Reserve? Not aware of any NNRs in Galloway

Have you been here before? No one visited NNRs in Galloway

Why not? Transport was perceived as the major barrier, several members don't drive, arranging group transport was seen as onerous due to uncertainty of numbers, and uncertainty of what to expect on a reserve. Generally the group is quite happy and prefers to do short local walks from Castle Douglas, and there is no particular interest in the opportunities presented by visiting an NNR.

Where would you have looked locally for information you might have needed before coming on the walk? Tourist Information centres, internet. No one had seen information leaflets. When produced, it was considered that they did not contain appropriate information about walk routes, however the web address was considered useful.

Would it have met the needs of a health walk group? Visits to NNRs were perceived as potential future visits as long as the following criteria were checked: entry charges need to be transparent, there needs to be a range of walk routes with paths clearly set out. Paths need to have good surfaces (hard-cored) without muddy or wet patches. While gentle inclines are acceptable, there is no desire to undertake hill walking.

Any other points? There was quite a lot of uncertainty about what to expect at an NNR, with a concern that walking options would be too difficult. There was little interest in booking transport or undertaking prolonged journeys to NNRs (> ½ hr). This group have had difficulty in recruiting and retaining members who fit the target group (most members are retired and fairly healthy), trips to NNRs are perceived as even more off putting for the recruitment of the target group.

APPENDIX 2: RISK ASSESSMENT SPECIMEN

Risk Assessment Sheet

Walk Location: Blawhorn Moss

Date: 23rd May 2007

Assessment carried out by:

Hazard	Who might be harmed?	How is the risk controlled?	What further action is necessary to control the risk?
No facilities	Walkers requiring access to toilet facilities	Local toilet in Blackridge	
No shelter / exposed route	Those without appropriate clothing	Advise of clothing requirements prior to walk	
Isolated car park	Independent walkers and walkers' cars	Advise walkers of situation	
Board Walk	Walkers with balance issues, walking aids	Advise walkers prior to boardwalk	

A Risk Assessment of any walk in a 'Health Walk' programme is the responsibility of the programme co-ordinator