

# Multi-trails: Community Trail Planning Workshop

Magnus House, Aigas Field Centre (a.m.) & Aigas Forest (p.m.)

by Crask of Aigas IV4 7AD

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019

10 am – 4 pm

## EVENT REPORT

### AGENDA

#### 10:00 Welcome + Project & Event Overview

– Jon Hollingdale (*CWA CEO*) & Chris Marsh (*CWA - Multi-trails Project Manager*)

#### 10:10 Introduction: Swedish Project Overview & partners

– Ellen Hoas Ströman (*Sjö, Skog & Fjäll LAG - Multi-trails Project Manager*)

– Hanna Moback & Helena Fjellgren (*Åre & Lofsdalsfjällen projects/tourist associations*)

#### 11.00 Trail Design & Standards for All Abilities – Planning & Defining Ambition

– John Duffy (*Senior Development Officer, Paths for All*)

- *Paths for All info sheets, case studies & guidance documents were available to take away.*

#### 12.00 Grading & Management of Trails – a Forestry & Land Scotland perspective

– John Ireland (*FLS Safety Health & Wellbeing Advisor*)

#### 13.00 Lunch @ Aigas House

#### 14:00 Aigas Community Forest – Site Visit

- Helge Hansen (*ACF Community Forester*), John Graham & Neil Valentine (*ACF Directors*)

#### 16:00 Finish & Depart

The Multi-trails project is funded by the Highland and Cairngorm LEADER programmes, co-financed by the Scottish Government and the European Commission.



**In Attendance:**

**Chris Marsh** - Community Woodlands Association

**Jon Hollingdale** - Community Woodlands Association

**John Duffy** - Paths for All

**John Ireland** – Forestry & Land Scotland

**Jim Murray** – Kirkhill & Bunchrew Community Trust

**Donald Shiach** – Kirkhill & Bunchrew Community Trust

**Sandy Payne** – Kirkhill & Bunchrew Community Trust

**Anna Graham** – Dunnet Forestry Trust

**Colin Graham** – Dunnet Forestry Trust

**Katherine Murphy** – Trees for Life

**Graham Wallace** – Trees for Life

**Sandy Underwood** - Ullapool Community Trust

**Terry Rose** - Ullapool Community Trust

**Steve Twitchett** - Ullapool Community Trust

**Helge Hansen** - Aigas Community Forest

**Neil Valentine** - Aigas Community Forest

**Pete Smith** - Aigas Community Forest

**Jo Young** - Aigas Community Forest

*and Swedish LEADER project partner participants: -*

**Ellen Hoas Ströman** - Project Manager, *Leader Sjö, Skog & Fjäll*

**Hanna Moback** - Chairwoman, *Åre village and tourist association*

**Helena Fjellgren** - Project Manager, *Lofsdalsfjällen tourist association*

**Jonny Larsson** - Ski Resort Manager, *Lofsdalen Ski Resort*

**Petter Bromée** - Project Manager, *Vemdalen Destination*

**Dag Tjernberg** - Area Manager, *SkiStar Åre*

**Jon Wagenius** - Board Member, *LAG Sjö, Skog & Fjäll*

**Susanne Du Rietz** - Project Manager, *Leader Sjö, Skog & Fjäll*

**Joakim Glans**

**Henrik Svetsnoff**

**Henrik Nylund**

**Ulf Jakobsson**

**Kalle Ljungberg**

**Henrik Branén.**

## Welcome - Project & Event Overview

**Jon Hollingdale** welcomed all to the event, remarking how pleased he was to see the Multi-trails project making good progress. It was less than a year ago that he, and Swedish LEADER manager Catarina Nordin Thorpe, were busy defining the project proposal so it was good to see that already some major project milestones had been achieved. This week, the visiting Swedes had had a chance to see some of the trail 'sub-projects' within their Scottish context. Earlier in the year, a group of Scottish community woodland group representatives had similarly visited Jamtland to gain a Swedish perspective. The overall project runs until September 2020 and more exchange visits are in the planning stage whilst other training events and trail construction initiatives will also be delivered. Jon then gave a quick overview of the CWA: a membership organisation established to support community woodland groups all over Scotland as well as representing the community woodland sector at a national level in forestry and social policy discussion and development. He handed over to Chris to talk more specifically about the Multi-trails project and the day's agenda, wishing everyone an informative and enjoyable day.

**Chris Marsh's** presentation is at <https://youtu.be/zJ0Qp1sgKgl>. The format of today was two morning presentations (with discussion) by Paths for All and Forestry & Land Scotland, followed in the afternoon by a guided walk around community-owned Aigas Forest - to look at a variety of public access issues as well as a new project-funded trail constructed there. This event is part of a series of training workshops that the CWA are running over the next twelve months as part of the 'Multi-trails' project. An initial training day had been held in August in Lochcarron with a focus on Defining/Specifying Trails. An event report was produced and is available on the CWA website. Five trail construction sub-projects are also being delivered (at Aigas, Abriachan, Lochcarron, Laggan and Strathnairn) with case studies and other instructive literature to be produced by the collaborating Swedish and Scottish partners.

The objective of the wider project is to share innovation and good practice in the planning, construction and management of mixed-use trails. The project is being delivered by the Community Woodlands Association in Scotland but also collaborating with Swedish partner organisation, *Sjö, Skog & Fjäll LAG*, in organising a number of exemplar trail construction sub-projects, reciprocal study visits, seminars and joint publications over the project's 18-month lifespan. Chris' Swedish counterpart Ellen Hoas Stroman had been invited to give a presentation to this meeting to describe their ambitions and progress and including some quick portraits of a couple of their sub-projects from on-the-ground project staff.

## Swedish Project Overview & partners

- Ellen Hoas Ströman (*Sjö, Skog & Fjäll LAG - Multi-trails Project Manager*)
- Hanna Moback & Helena Fjellgren (*Åre & Lofsdalsfjällen projects/tourist associations*)

Ellen's presentation slides are here: <https://youtu.be/7okzy2ZSBCE>

*Note: In Sweden, LEADER projects are initiated then orchestrated by a Local Access Group (LAG) - unlike in the UK where individual LAGs are more 'hands off' – taking a role in initial project/funding approval and then a monitoring and administrative role. Ellen therefore works for the Jamtland LAG as the project manager for the dozen access projects that constitute the Swedish side of this trans-national Multi-Trails project.*

Jamtland is the second largest county in Sweden lying in the centre of the country – bordered by Norway to the west and Lapland to the north. At over 34,000 square kilometres it occupies almost 9% of Sweden's land area but has just 1% of the population. The terrain of the area is predominantly highland sub-arctic with small-scale family-farming agriculture and some commercial forestry the main land uses occupying the more sheltered, fertile valleys (limited history or extent of conventional industry). Extensive tracts of the upland are conserved, and utilised for, reindeer herding by indigenous Sami peoples.

Tourism is the region's largest economic activity predominantly centred around winter sports (e.g. alpine and cross-country skiing, skidoo trails and some significant downhill ski resorts) but summer activities are increasingly popular e.g. hiking, running, biking, horse riding and canoeing. The title of Ellen's LAG is "Sjö, Skog & Fjäll" which means "Lake, Forest & Mountain".

For Ellen, the sub-projects within her Multi-trails portfolio are focussed around the ambition to increase – through considering novel and best-practice design, management and promotion - the range and variety of access activities the region has to offer. Essentially this involves diversifying the skills and focus of a mainly ski- and snow-based business sector and its component communities. Ellen listed the sub-projects she is working with to give a flavour for the variety of activities and locations involved:

- A System for Management of Trails using Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
- Trail Packaging and Promoting: Experiences in Storsjö/Ljungdalen
- Pilot Study: Tracks and Trails in Funäsfjällen
- Vemdalen Summer 2.0
- Åre – a World Class Cycling Destination
- Development of Equestrian Trails at Frösön
- The Pilgrim MTB Trail
- The Holy Race
- Fishing Destination - Berg
- Outdoor Area/Fishing Place for Disabled
- The History of Åre - an Unused Resource
- Post-Johan's Road

Ellen briefly described two sub-projects: **The Holy Race** is being led by an alpine ski club and youth group to create a new annual competitive event that will use (and renovate) a derelict walking trail that traditionally linked to remote villages. Start and end points were churches in these communities (hence 'Holy' Race) and an initial, very popular, event was organised in 2018 with many families and competitive runners attending and taking part. They also ran regional cooking demonstrations and competitions - broadening local engagement and to showcase (eat and enjoy!) the region's diverse cuisine.

**Post-Johan's Road** is trying to establish a fully integrated trails network in the Vålådals area (for running, cycling, riding & skiing). These are designed to start directly from the local train station (i.e. tourist arrival point/method) and connecting into local communities, accommodation and resorts. In this way the region can develop a sustainable, low carbon tourism experience based around public and green transport, joint trail development and management – and increasing sustainable hospitality jobs.

*Ellen then handed over to two other speakers to briefly explain their specific projects:*

### ***The History of Åre – an unused resource***

Hanna Moback's presentation is here: <https://youtu.be/oK0Zizl74Bg>

Hanna is local community councillor in Åre and working to deliver this sub-project. It aims to draw together a cultural and historic archive for the area and develop projects that use this resource to promote them for community and tourist benefit. Different strands of the sub-project include : collecting oral history with elders, digitising and archiving historic documents, collating inventories and information on ancient artefacts, improving historic interpretation at five key sites, creating accessibility to newly-archived materials to inform future tourism development, undertaking a museum feasibility study, costing proposals for some renovated historic trails and – finally - exploring novel and engaging ways of communicating their cultural history to others.

## ***The Pilgrim Trail***

Helena Fjellgren's presentation slides are here: <https://youtu.be/loauc3Q81eE>

Helena leads this sub-project based at Lofsdalen - a well-developed and popular ski resort in the south of the region – with dozens of formally managed slopes and extensive cross-country ski trails of international renown. In recent years, the local tourism association has been developing the area's year-round appeal with significant investment in downhill mountain bike trails and better promotion of summer activities that capture the natural environment at its best. This specific sub-project is developing a network of (both new & renovated) cycling and hiking trails that will be open all year round along a traditional pilgrimage route. It therefore hopes to research and then incorporate information about the area's rich history and wealth of stories and that are not yet related in existing – but often non-existent – interpretation. This will further broaden the cycling appeal of the area in particular beyond the more conventional, thrill-seeking mountain biker market.

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## **Trail Design & Standards for All Abilities – Planning & Defining Ambition**

– John Duffy (*Senior Development Officer, Paths for All*)

John's presentation slides are here: <https://youtu.be/vHJyS3tDGfs>

John had made a previous presentation to this project's Lochcarron training event in August. This had focussed on the decision making and consideration required when contemplating and specifying new trails. The CWA report written to summarise this event would be a very useful reference point (with many online links) to a huge range of access guidance literature and should prove useful also to today's attendees (see CWA website). Today the emphasis of his presentation was on maximising inclusivity in access design – the underpinning legislation, and the principles and best practice that derive from trying to maximise an all-abilities ethos. John admitted he had a lot of slides and photographs supporting his talk and recommended that the slide show itself may act as a useful future reference 'document' for potential trail developers.

He explained the significance of the two main Acts informing the regulation of access provision: the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and the Equality Act 2010. These place responsibility on designers to identify who their potential access users are, to understand their needs and to arrive at inclusive design i.e. routes aimed at removing or avoiding barriers to access. This is commonly referred to the principle of 'the least restrictive option'. The approach ensures that access design endeavours to enable *everyone* to participate *equally, confidently and independently* in taking access.

John also highlighted the British Standards developed for specific elements of access infrastructure. These Standards are not a legal requirement but compliance with them ensures best practice is being adopted e.g. BS5709:2018 gives specifications for gaps, gates and stiles. His presentation also listed and explained other key guidance documents (e.g. The Fieldfare Trust's 2005 Countryside for All Standards) relating to all abilities access and some useful design tools that can be used such as the concept (and analysis) of the Access Chain, Action Planning and Zoning in access development. He went on to describe the rationale behind the development of trail grading – allowing users of varying mobility and ability to make informed and confident access choices. This led on to the importance of clear, informative and unambiguous signage. The recent focus on providing dementia-friendly access has also highlighted the importance of clarity and simplicity in signage as well as other design considerations in well-purposed access infrastructure. Finally John touched on the aspiration for Shared Access and therefore the additional consideration that needs to be given during the design phase to anticipating the needs of all users and – as a consequence – adequately providing for them.

John also referenced the Scottish Outdoor Access Guide and a separate specific slideshow was recommended and can be found here: <https://youtu.be/ljIwR5lvcoM>

## Grading & Management of Trails – a Forestry & Land Scotland perspective

– John Ireland (*FLS Safety Health and Wellbeing Advisor*)

John's presentation slides are here: <https://youtu.be/NLeJXEiAzng>.

John opened with the remark that it is not practical or even possible to provide visitors to the national forest estate with an entirely risk-free environment. Instead, FLS do all that is reasonably practical to create a Safe Environment. This is defined as: *'one where the level of risk is broadly acceptable to both the visitor and society at large'*. To some extent therefore, management of public access to the forest estate can be viewed as a process of Risk Control and this has several elements:

- Assessing the hazards within a site and risk assessing individual trails/features.
- Ensuring Risk Control measures are consistent (e.g. a national trail grading system & signage).
- Monitoring visitor behaviour and experiences to help review (and revise) facilities.
- Making sure that when there is work (forest ops or other) FLS avoid exposing visitors to risk.

John explained that the consideration and provision of custom-built off-road biking trails within UK state-owned forests had its origins as far back as the 1970's. At this time the objective was primarily to move these new forest users off existing forest roads - where there were increasing safety concerns over potential conflict and interference between cyclists and conventional forest management activities – and onto dedicated cycle trails. By the early 2000s, mountain biking technology and interest had increased hugely and to the extent that the (then) Forestry Commission were proactive in developing some of Britain's largest mountain bike trail centres within the national forest estate. The once specialised disciplines of trail design, construction, maintenance, grading and promotion were becoming mainstream considerations within many forest districts. Today, of an estimated 11.8 million people who own a mountain bike in the UK, approximately 1.3 million ride off-road a minimum of 2-4 times per month. The 7Stanes trail centres of southern Scotland for example are estimated to have brought an additional £9 million to local economies since their inception and now attract over 400,000 biking visitors per year.

Mountain biking is by its nature a potentially hazardous activity and therefore carries significant risk. Because of access rights granted by legislation in Scotland and the responsibility incumbent upon all landowners to maintain a duty of care to all who take responsible access, FLS must anticipate, plan and manage for these risks. In practical terms this means that mountain bike trails must be designed and constructed by competent, experienced individuals/organisations and be both sustainable and fit for purpose. They must also be built and compliant with industry construction regulations (CDM) as well as (obviously!) to meet the needs of the user. This means that trails are 'stratified' so that their degree of difficulty – and hence the skills required to ride them – is predictable, relatively consistent within each trail, and can therefore be properly 'advertised'. In this way, riders can make an informed choice about using (or not) a trail. The grading system is based on the ski grading system but has evolved over the years to incorporate additional symbols and grades for some extreme, downhill trails.

FLS have also worked with other national access organisations to encourage state foresters and private land managers to develop trails and trail networks in close liaison with riders and user groups. Doing so helps both land managers and riders consider (collaboratively) the risks and controls, understanding too that by creating mutually agreeable trails this reduces the likelihood of future, unauthorised trail building - posing greater, often the greatest, risk to both users and site managers. John went on to describe the trail grading system that had been similarly developed (in conjunction with other access/recreation industry bodies) for walkers. Again this system is intended to allow users to make an informed choice and to help find trails to that meet expectation and ability.

John mentioned a Risk Benefit system that he provides to individual FLS regions and offered to share a related presentation with CWA explaining its rationale. This is here <https://youtu.be/7q-wuTB3dXI> . Finally, he offered his contact details for anyone wishing to discuss particular access safety issues or concerns at a future date. These are: [John.Ireland@forestryandland.gov.scot](mailto:John.Ireland@forestryandland.gov.scot) and 07810 180124.

## **Aigas Community Forest – Site Visit**



***John Graham (ACF Director) welcomes the visitors to Aigas forest.***

John Graham described the evolution of the forest buyout which completed in March 2015 and explained the role of the ACF Board - all unpaid, local residents with a range of interests and experience in business and land management. The Board has overall responsibility for everything that happens in and at the forest. ACF employ a two-day-a-week community forester, Helge Hansen (left of John) who explained his role in overseeing forest management operations – from large-scale harvesting contracts to the work of local volunteers, implementation of the forest plan, woodfuel production as well as broader community engagement (e.g. hosting school visits, liaison with neighbours, deer management etc). The majority of the forest was planted in the 1950's and 60's and the main emphasis of management is to achieve a full continuous cover ethos based around incremental thinning and proactive deer control to achieve follow-on recruitment of new trees/timber crops. Neil Valentine (to the left of Helge) explained his role as ACF director with specific interest in defining and leading much of the local volunteer work undertaken in the woods including the recent trail construction under the Multi-trails project.



***Walking along the main forest road towards the new Multi-trails track (left hand spur)***

On our way through the forest, we stopped to see the woodfuel production area (small forestry tractor with log crane & TPO firewood processor, timber stacks and bagged firewood) as well as to see one of the 'as dug' quarry areas where much of the stone for the new trail was won simply using an excavator and bucket to break out the material and a four-wheel-drive dumper to move stone to the trail.

In a (mature, thinned) pinewood stand adjacent to the quarry area was an electric-fenced enclosure containing half a dozen Mangalitsa pigs. These are owned and managed by a local livestock business and are being used in trial areas in the forest to assess whether their foraging activity – which is clearly helping to scarify and disturb woodland ground vegetation cover – will ultimately increase the success of tree regeneration as seed falls from the parent Scot's pine overstorey.



At the threshold of the new trail, Neil Valentine explained ACF's objectives in locating and specifying the new construction. It is intended as a upgraded link for walkers and other non-motorised recreational users in the forest: from the forest road at this top end and an old Victorian carriage track in the lower forest. The intermediate ground was boggy and overgrown and the trail line even difficult to discern in places let alone comfortably walk over. Additionally, on account of the continuous cover forest management of the forest – the track had been specified to accommodate the weight and width of a compact forest tractor and log trailer for extraction of timber from small-scale and selective fellings prescribed as part of continuous cover management.





Neil also elaborated on another key aspiration of ACF: to get younger people involved and in particular trained to undertake forestry work. As a retired forest machines trainer, Neil is certified to deliver training as well as act as supervisor to novice operators needing to develop experience and competence towards attaining industry qualifications. This trail had therefore been built by ACF volunteers but also two local self-employed trail construction contractors working towards certification in use of 360° excavators and the work had given them a legitimate opportunity to develop required skills.

We then walked down the new trail – nominal 3 metre width with both foundation sub-base and surfacing provided by excavator bucket-ripped stone (larger material below, smaller material above) – giving a level and adequately smooth walking surface without the use of compaction or roller equipment. The surfacing will bed in still further with use (e.g. rollover of pneumatic tyres and pedestrian footfall). Forest drains and permanent watercourses were crossed with 300mm diameter twin-wall culvert pipes. These had originally been planned at 150mm but, upon advice from Paths for All, ACF had increased these to 300mm. Recent torrential rainfall had proven this increase to have been prudent one.

Reaching the lower carriage trail (Lady's Walk) we came to the exit of one of the unauthorised mountain bike trails that snake through parts of Aigas Forest. This sinuous track meandered down through a stand of thinned Douglas fir at an amazingly steep gradient and with a number of 'features' (jumps, revetments and berms) constructed from local scavenged deadwood and boulders. Little damage was apparent to soils or standing timber with probably the greatest inherent risk being to the users themselves on such challenging, technical trails but also - where these trails meet other trails and roads – other forest users.



***Walking up one of the shallow sections of a downhill mountain bike trail***

Since community acquisition of the forest, the ACF Board have continually discussed the presence, risks and frequent inconvenience (e.g. forest management) that these self-build trails represent. As landowners, they recognise and accept the duty of care they have to all forest users and also the rights of all responsible non-motorised visitors have in their woods. They have been trying to engage with the biker/builders themselves in an effort to both moderate and work with them. ACF's priority must be to ensure that all forest access provision is not only safe but also does not compromise the safety of others - thus exposing ACF to liability through ill-conceived or poorly managed trails and infrastructure. Many of these riders are young and typically 'involved' for a few years then moving on to other things/forests. It has therefore proved difficult to establish a meaningful and long-lasting relationship with riders. Nevertheless, in recent months there has been interest among many bikers in the region to establish a constituted club or association and – once done – this would allow ACF to engage and work more constructively with a recognised and accountable user group.



*Attendees of the Multi-trails training day – Swedish visitors & Scottish community woodlanders*

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