

VISITOR MANAGEMENT REPORT 2021

JOHN
MUIR
TRUST

FOR
wild LAND &
wild PLACES

Frontline realities: Rural communities and visitor pressures

johnmuirtrust.org



Table of Contents

- 1. Summary 1**
- 2. Introduction..... 2**
- 3. Methodology 3**
 - 3.1 Research design 3
 - 3.2 Covid-19 and ethical considerations..... 3
- 4. Key issues 4**
 - 4.1 Visitor volume 4
 - 4.2 Social and environmental pressures 4
 - 4.3 Marketing and social media..... 6
 - 4.4 Infrastructure and public funding 7
 - 4.5 Lack of community consultation 8
- 5. Voicing community concerns 9**
 - 5.1 Isle of Skye 9
 - 5.2 Isle of Lewis and Harris 11
 - 5.3 Assynt and North West Sutherland..... 13
 - 5.4 Lochaber 17
 - 5.5 Highland Perthshire 20
- 6. Policy and practical recommendations 22**
 - 6.1 Actions for Scottish Government..... 22
 - 6.2 Actions for VisitScotland 23
 - 6.3 Actions for Local Authorities..... 23
 - 6.4 Actions for local communities 23
 - 6.5 Actions for the John Muir Trust 24
- 7. Conclusion 25**
- 8. Contact information 25**
- 9. Acknowledgements 26**

Edited by: Cecilie Dohm

Cover image: Abandoned litter and campfire site in Glen Nevis © Nathan Berrie

1. Summary

In 2019, the John Muir Trust identified growing visitor pressures on remote rural communities and wild places as a policy priority. Visitor numbers have been increasing gradually across the Trust's properties, and although it is great to see that more people want to get out to connect with nature and enjoy the outdoors, the rising popularity is presenting challenges to both rural communities and wild places. With the easing of the Covid-19 lockdown in July 2020, visitor numbers became a major issue across large parts of rural Scotland.

To get a better understanding of the practical problems caused by growing visitor pressures, the Trust conducted a series of in-depth interviews with local community representatives living around Trust land on the Isle of Skye, Assynt, North West Sutherland, Lochaber, and Highland Perthshire, along with the Isle of Lewis and Harris. By capturing current perspectives from rural communities in Scotland – a voice that can be under-represented in strategic policy work – the Trust aims to inform national and local visitor management strategies.

This report presents our findings and examines the impacts of increasing visitor numbers and pressures on rural communities and wild places. The research was carried out by the Trust from October to December 2020, and the report includes both quantitative and qualitative data. The results show that local communities are facing significant challenges from the increased flow of tourists. Notably, 97% of the interview participants stated that they were experiencing increasing visitor pressures, and 82% stated that they had noticed a change in the type of visitors they were receiving, as a growing percentage of visitors are behaving more irresponsibly. The report finds that while there are slight regional differences, the main issues are:

- Increased waste and littering
- Inappropriate road-side parking
- Inappropriate 'wild' camping, particularly along roads and within village boundaries
- Human waste and inappropriate toileting
- Increased traffic and pressure on local roads, particularly on single-track roads
- Lack of awareness of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code
- Pressure from increased numbers of campervans
- Negative impacts on the environment from e.g. fires, increased footfall and tree cutting
- Disruption to rural communities, especially from increased traffic and intrusive camping
- Anti-social visitor behaviour
- Lack of affordable housing due to increased buyouts for self-catering holiday homes

The tourism sector is an important and growing part of many rural economies in Scotland. While local communities recognise the need to maintain and nurture tourism initiatives, communities feel strongly that existing resources and infrastructure is inadequate and unable to deal with the growing visitor numbers and pressures. Based on the feedback the Trust received from interview participants and drawing on our experience as land managers of popular tourist "hotspots" like Ben Nevis, Sandwood Bay, and the Isle of Skye, the report presents a series of policy and practical recommendations to help address the main issues.

The recommendations on page 22 – addressed to the Scottish Government, VisitScotland, Local Authorities, local communities, and the Trust itself – include enabling strategic funding for rural infrastructure where it is most needed, expanding and prioritising information about the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC), investing in countryside ranger services, as well as advocating "slow tourism". With the right policies in place, the Trust believes that we can enable positive benefits for rural communities, local economies, and the natural environment, while ensuring that everyone can connect with wild places respectfully and responsibly.

2. Introduction

Tourism generates vital income and economic opportunities for remote and rural communities across Scotland, but growing visitor numbers are also creating challenges for both local communities and wild places, especially when they are concentrated in particular places.

The John Muir Trust is dedicated to the experience, protection, and repair of wild places. We own and care for some of the finest wild places in Scotland, and we are experiencing visitor pressures at several of our properties. We are responsible for a number of tourist hotspots; for example, we manage the summit of Ben Nevis and gateways into the Cuillin mountains on the Isle of Skye, as well as the main path to the summit of the popular Highland Perthshire Munro Schiehallion. Our property at Sandwood Bay has also seen increasing numbers of visitors due to the popularity of the North Coast 500 route and the fact that Sandwood Bay is listed as one of the world's most beautiful beaches.

The Trust works with local and national government, local communities, businesses, and agencies such as VisitScotland and NatureScot to manage visitors in these areas. While visitor numbers have been rising steadily over the last couple of years, the trend came to a head in 2020. With the easing of the first Covid-19 lockdown in July 2020, people visited Scotland's wild places in unprecedented numbers to seek freedom and adventure, and the sudden and concentrated influx of tourists to particular areas and hotspots resulted in widespread negative impacts on both rural communities and wild places.¹

To get a better understanding of the practical problems caused by growing visitor numbers, the Trust wanted to hear from local communities living on and around Trust land. Through a series of in-depth interviews, we consulted with 37 community representatives from around Trust properties on the Isle of Skye, Assynt, North West Sutherland, Lochaber, and Highland Perthshire, along with Lewis and Harris. This report voices their concerns and highlights the acute imbalance between Government investment in marketing and advertisement as opposed to rural infrastructure. Finally, based on community feedback and drawing on our experience as land managers, we propose a number of policy and practical solutions in order to help facilitate pre-emptive action ahead of Spring and Summer 2021.



Litter and abandoned camping gear collected by Trust rangers in Glen Nevis © Nathan Berrie

¹ The Trust has seen a significant increase in visitors to its properties, as has NatureScot to its reserves (see chapter 5 for more details).

3. Methodology

The research for this report was carried out by Trust staff members from October to December 2020. 24 people from local communities around the Isle of Skye, Lewis and Harris, Assynt, and North West Sutherland were interviewed in-person, and 13 people from local communities around Lochaber and Highland Perthshire were interviewed virtually. All interviews were voice-recorded to ensure that information and direct quotes were captured accurately.

3.1 Research design

The research was conducted through a mixed methods approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative interview elements. Thus, the first half of the interviews included structured, close-ended questions, which were used to quantify and visualise responses, while the second half of the interviews included semi-structured, open-ended questions, which provided participants with the opportunity to voice their personal views and opinions. This freedom of self-expression allowed for a deeper and more in-depth examination of the respondents' lived experiences and the kind of actions that are needed to address growing visitor pressures.

Interview participants were selected through purposive and, where relevant, snowball sampling. Coordinating with our Property Managers and Rangers at the various Trust properties, local community representatives were identified and sampled in a strategic way to make sure that they would be relevant to the research and to ensure a good deal of variety among the respondents. Occasionally, if a potential interviewee was unable to participate, he/she would refer another member from the local community. While we recognise that a random selection would have rendered a more representative sample, this approach was chosen due to time and resource constraints, and because we wanted to hear specifically from local communities living on and around Trust properties.

With the participant's prior consent, each interview was recorded and transcribed. Given that verbatim transcriptions require repeated listening, they "ensure that transcripts are accurate reflections of the interviews and that interpolation does not occur".² For the qualitative segments, content analysis was used to systematically code the data and generate categories. The findings have been visualised in bar graphs by counting the instances of these categories across all 37 interviews (see figure 3 and 8).

3.2 Covid-19 and ethical considerations

Throughout the research, the John Muir Trust observed all ethical guidelines for social research as well as Covid-19 procedures. All participants were provided with detailed information sheets about the nature of the research along with their rights as participants, and it was made clear to each of the respondents that they could choose to withdraw from the project at any given time. Additionally, all participants signed an interview consent form prior to the interviews, and the direct quotes in this report were reviewed and approved by the interviewees. To observe General Data Protection Regulation, all voice-recordings were deleted after the transcriptions.

As part of the Trust's supportive measures to protect both interview participants and staff members, all interview participants were provided with information about the Trust's Covid-19 Risk Assessment and Working Procedures, which were applicable to and informed by Scottish Government guidance. Where interviews took place in person, they were socially distanced and limited to maximum four people from two households, in accordance with Scottish Government guidelines at the time.

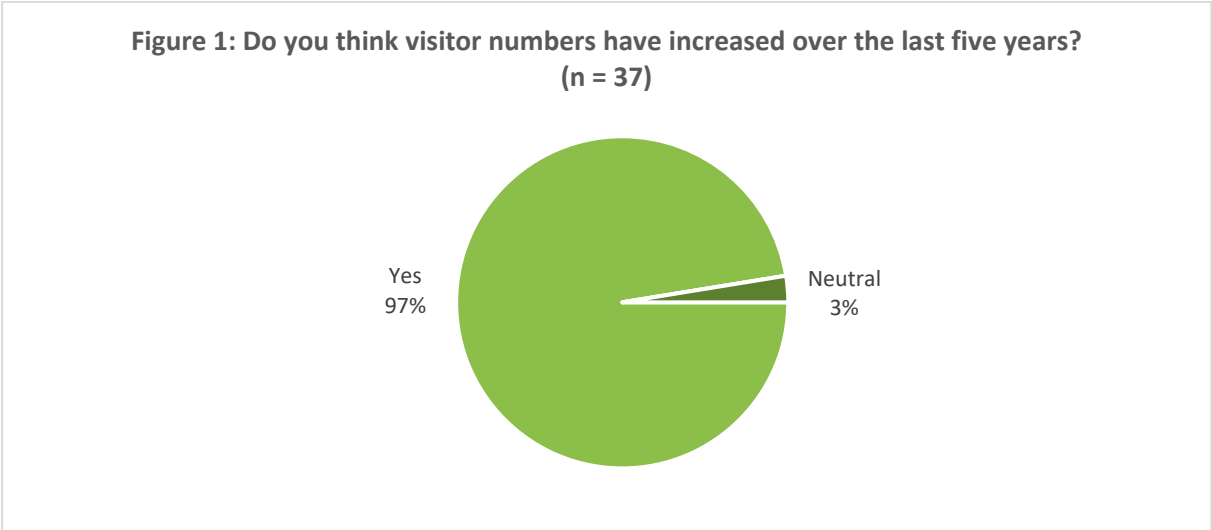
² Wellard & McKenna (2001): "Turning tapes into text: Issues surrounding the transcription of interviews". *Contemporary Nurse*. 11(2-3), p185.

4. Key issues

Tourism is vitally important to Scotland. The sector supports more than 200,000 jobs and contributes over £7 billion to our economy.³ Marketing initiatives such as the North Coast 500 and the on-going promotion of Scotland’s stunning and remote landscapes by government-sponsored organisations like VisitScotland have been a success when measured against economic benefits, but they have come at a cost, as the very communities that should be seeing the benefits from tourism are feeling increasingly overwhelmed by soaring visitor numbers.

4.1 Visitor volume

Notably, 97% of interview participants felt that visitor numbers have increased over the last five years (figure 1). Their observations correspond with latest VisitScotland statistics, which indicate that visitor numbers in Scotland are increasing across the board. The trend of growth over the years is evident, particularly in terms of international visitors, but domestic tourism has also increased since 2016, with 2019 being the best year for overnight tourism in Scotland over the last decade.⁴



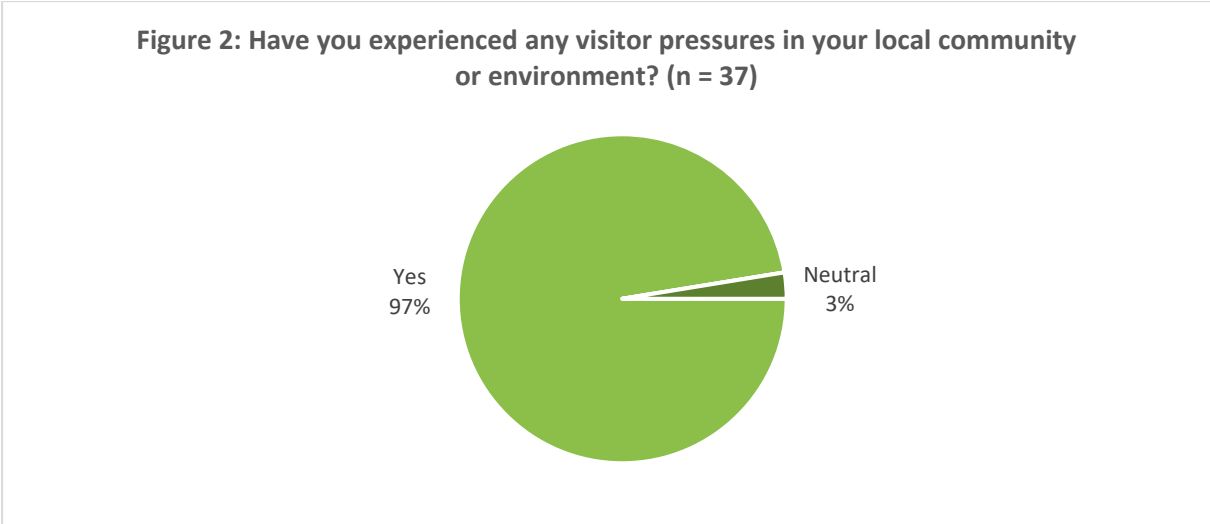
While the upsurge in visitor numbers has contributed significantly to both rural economies and employment rates, local residents in particularly popular places often end up feeling “under siege”. For example, interview participants from around the Isle of Skye and along the North Coast 500 route feel especially overwhelmed (see 5.1 and 5.3), as local infrastructure is not set up to cope with the booming numbers. Communities are therefore concerned that the increasing visitor numbers will damage local areas and detract from the very things that bring people to the Highlands in the first place. In other words, special places may not feel so special anymore due to the sheer volume of people visiting at any one time.

4.2 Social and environmental pressures

In conjunction with increasing visitor numbers, pressures on rural communities and wild places have also been increasing. Accordingly, when asked whether they had experienced any visitor pressures in their local community or environment, 97% of respondents said yes.

³ The National (2020): “Nicola Sturgeon launches new Scotland Outlook 2030 strategy” (read the full article [here](#)).

⁴ VisitScotland (2020): “Key facts on tourism in Scotland 2019”, p14 and 19 (read the full report [here](#)).



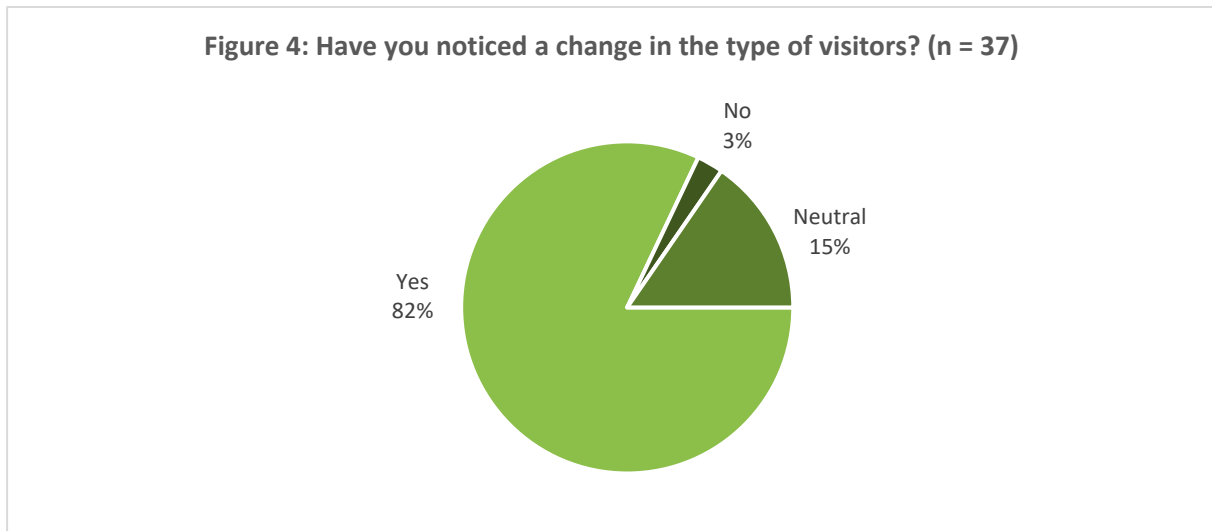
Throughout the interviews, many participants revealed feelings of frustration or indignation, as visitor pressures generally appear to be intensifying. While each interviewee presented their own individual observations, the main pressures have been grouped into the following 11 categories:



The bar graph highlights which pressures were mentioned most frequently during the interviews. For instance, “increased waste and littering” was mentioned in 33 out of 37 interviews and has thus been identified as the most prevalent pressure. Secondly, “inappropriate wild camping” and “inappropriate road-side parking” were mentioned in 31 out of 37 interviews, while “human waste” was mentioned in 29 out of 37 interviews, etc. Litter and human waste are becoming an increasingly problematic issue, and waste disposal sites (particularly for campervans) and road maintenance are not keeping pace with growing visitor numbers. Local roads often get clogged up with traffic, parking areas overflow, and people increasingly park in unsuitable and dangerous places such as laybys, passing places or private driveways, which can cause obstruction for local people. Interviewees also reported that negative environmental impacts from e.g. fires, footfall and tree cutting are on the rise.

4.3 Marketing and social media

Many interview participants reckoned that visitor pressures have been aggravated by the influence of marketing and social media. The emphasis on “top 10” and “must see” sites and the widespread use of hashtags on social media platforms like Instagram is contributing to a new kind of “tick-box” tourism and increased pressures at promoted places like the Fairy Pools on Skye, Ardvreck Castle in Sutherland, and the Steall Falls in Glen Nevis. Digital marketing campaigns and the pervasive presence of branding and internet ads also reaches and appeals to a wider audience. Indeed, 82% of interview participants confirmed that they had noticed a change in the type of visitors their region receives (figure 4).



This perceived change in visitors is becoming a cause for concern for many communities. The feeling is that the influence of social media and marketing initiatives such as the North Coast 500 are resulting in more short-stay visitors. This observation chimes with VisitScotland statistics, which show that 62% of domestic holiday trips made to Scotland in 2019 lasted 1-3 days.⁵ The increase in short-stay visitors and the growing presence of campervans and sports cars on local roads is attracting a lot of criticism, and several of the interviewees expressed concern that long-stay visitors, many of whom have been coming back for years, will be put off by the rise in visitor numbers, the increase in littering, and the increasingly busy roads.

Another impact ascribed to the change in visitors is a rising disregard towards local communities and the natural environment. Interview participants reported that visitors are increasingly displaying a severe lack of awareness of the SOAC and the notion of “leave no trace”, as they misinterpret the “right to roam” and show little thought for the consequences of their behaviour.

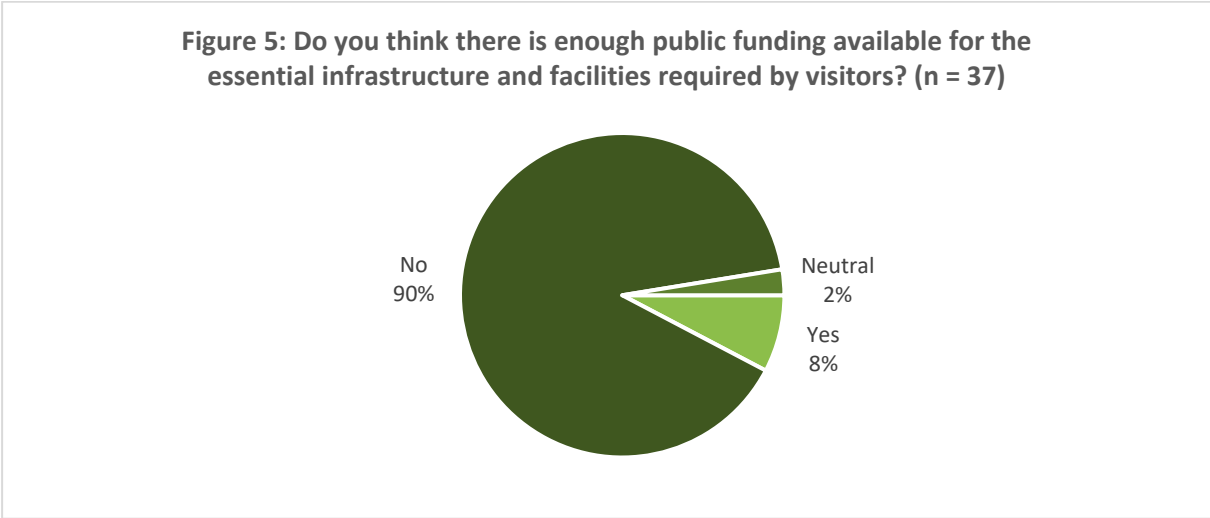
This trend became particularly apparent in 2020. As the global Covid-19 pandemic prevented people from going on holiday abroad, Governments across the UK encouraged people to holiday at home. To help restart Scottish tourism, VisitScotland launched a £3 million marketing campaign with TV, radio, and digital advertising, encouraging the strapline #OnlyInScotland.⁶ International Covid-19 restrictions and the new focus on “staycations” meant that many people turned their eyes to the remote and wild places of Scotland. Once national lockdown restrictions were eased, many visitors unfortunately ended up exacerbating social and environmental pressures, as they were poorly prepared, badly equipped and had little awareness of how to properly conduct themselves.

⁵ VisitScotland (2020): “Key Facts on Tourism in Scotland 2019”, p13 (read the full report [here](#)).

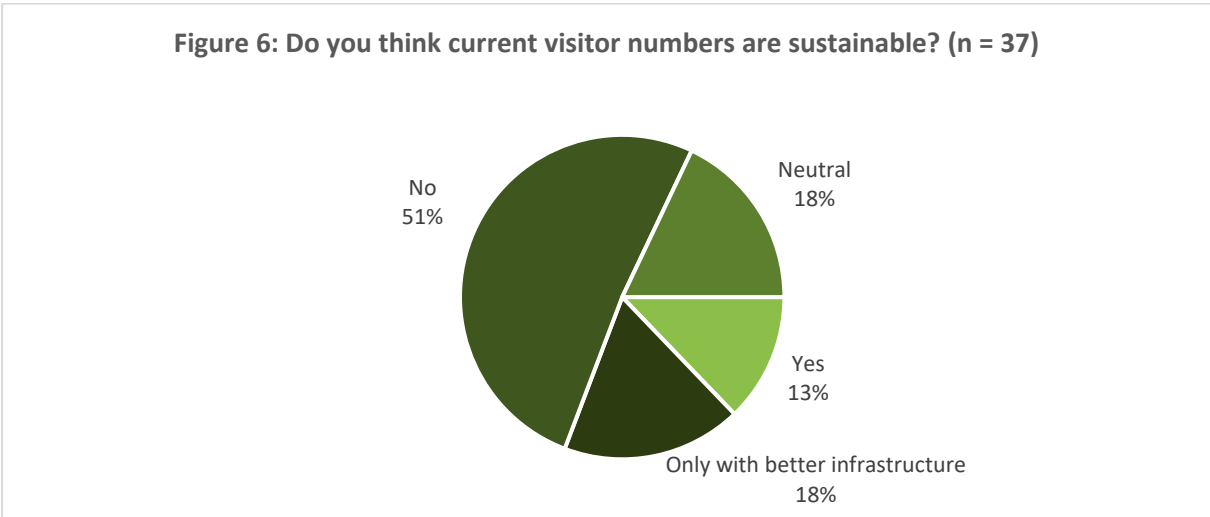
⁶ VisitScotland (2020): “Only in Scotland: Why Scotland needs you” (read the full article [here](#)).

4.4 Infrastructure and public funding

Over the last couple of years, many rural communities have witnessed a reduction in essential facilities like public toilets, bin collections and countryside ranger services, as local authorities have been forced to save money due to tightened budgets. These resource cuts have contributed significantly to current problems, and 90% of respondents agreed that there is not enough public funding for essential infrastructure.



The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) has made important progress in recent years by enabling new and improved visitor facilities in many areas. The Trust has made representations to policy makers and political parties, calling for the fund to be increased, and we welcomed the pledge in the Scottish Government’s draft budget for 2021-2022 to double the RTIF from £3 to £6.2 million. This will go some way to help ease visitor pressures by addressing capital costs, but it does not cover maintenance and the absence of adequate local authority resources means that maintaining the quality of visitor experiences and dealing with pressures falls to communities, community land trusts and conservation charities. Across Scotland, rural communities are increasingly encouraged to take on infrastructure projects such as car parks or toilets by applying for the RTIF. This places a substantial burden on volunteers from local community groups and given that communities are chasing the same limited pot of money, funding to mitigate negative impacts risks being awarded competitively rather than strategically, where it is most needed.

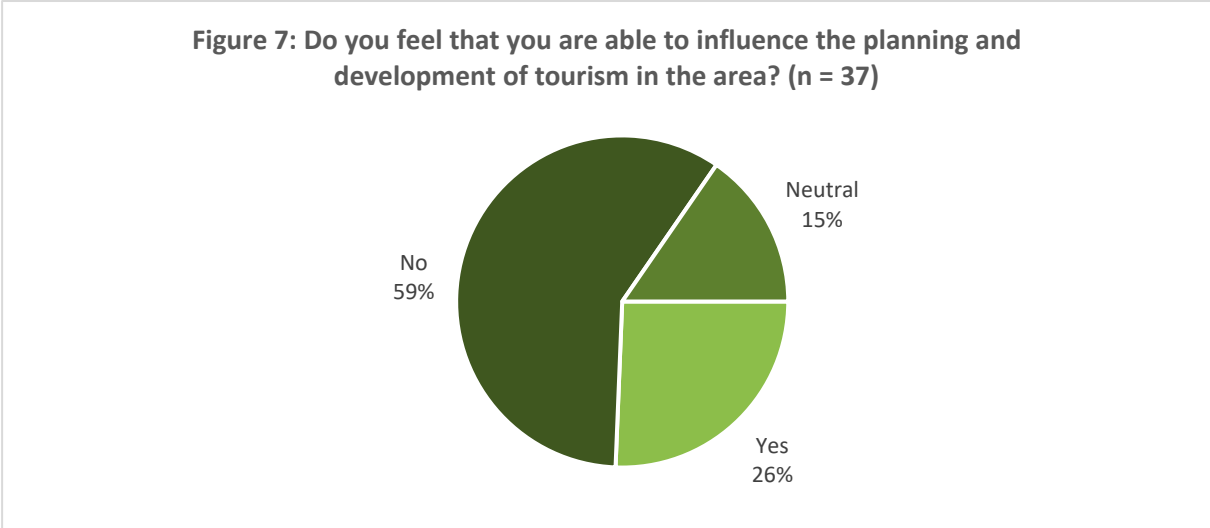


Based on the current state of rural infrastructure, the interview participants were asked whether they thought present visitor numbers are sustainable. 51% said no, 13% said yes, and 18% remained neutral, while 18% said that they believe current visitor numbers could be sustainable with better infrastructure (to clarify, the interviewees who answered yes to this question are all based on the Isle of Lewis and Harris, where ferry capacity currently limits visitor numbers).

Several interview participants emphasised the potential of introducing a transient visitor levy, also known as a tourism tax, as an additional contribution charged to people visiting an area as short-term visitors. While such a levy could be used to fund local authority expenditure on tourism-related infrastructure and activities, the interviewees stressed that the funds raised from a visitor levy should be spent locally in the area, where the funds would have been raised.

4.5 Lack of community consultation

In terms of community input, a majority of interviewees felt that there was little opportunity to share their views on visitor management, either because their input was not taken seriously, or because they did not know where to go to voice their concerns. When asked about whether they felt they were able to influence the planning and development of tourism in the area, 59% of interview participants said no, while 26% said yes, and 15% remained neutral.



A number of the interviewees furthermore referred to a “democratic deficit” and explained that rural communities often feel inadequately consulted on tourism-related developments. A key example cited in the interviews was the marketing of the North Coast 500 route, which many locals feel was undertaken with little forethought or community consultation. On their website, the private company refers to it as “the new scenic route” and writes: “Why not take the road that never was, that suddenly appeared, as if by magic”.⁷ The interview participants from Assynt and North West Sutherland stated that many local communities regard this kind of marketing as a misrepresentation of reality, as the roads that make up the route were of course there prior to the creation of the North Coast 500. When the new NC500 signs were put up along the popular route in early 2020, communities were once again excluded from the decision-making process, and the interviewees from Assynt and North West Sutherland explained that local communities fear that the new signs will only serve to intensify the problems already caused by the North Coast 500. Consequently, many communities feel increasingly disempowered, as some businesses benefit from marketing, while the negative impacts are felt by the whole community.

⁷ North Coast 500 (2020): “About the NCS500” (available online [here](#)).

5. Voicing community concerns

2020 saw record numbers of visitors across Scotland, particularly throughout the Highlands. It has been estimated that over a million people visited NatureScot's National Nature Reserves (NNRs) in 2020, an increase from 650,000 in recent years.⁸ The John Muir Trust has experienced similar peaks in numbers across its properties. The increase, which was initially sparked by the easing of lockdown restrictions, was followed by a continued interest in spending time in nature, and many communities reported that the tourist season in 2020 lasted longer than usual. As we prepare for the reopening of society in 2021, it is perhaps more important than ever to listen to the voices of local communities. In the following sections, we have tried to capture these voices to ensure that they are heard and to provide a pathway to decision-makers in both local and central Government.

5.1 Isle of Skye

The Isle of Skye has always been a popular tourist destination, particularly with continental tourists. However, due to the impact of Covid-19, this year saw a sharp decrease in continental tourists and an increase in national tourists. Community members from the Trust's properties at Strathaird, Torrin and Sconser reported widespread issues with littering and human waste and stated that visitors increasingly displayed a severe lack of awareness of the SOAC.

"What we have seen this year is a significant pressure on the natural environment, particularly from the amount of rubbish that has been left behind. People are parking their cars at the side of the road, stay by their car and set up their tent next to their car. The whole way around Loch Slapin this summer, there were tents and cars everywhere – it was a bit like a refugee camp. Previously, we might have expected people to park fairly sensibly and disappear into the hills somewhere, but these people are not used to wild camping, and you can tell by what they are coming with. They leave the tents, they leave the rubbish, they leave everything behind."

– **Anonymous**

Another particular concern for communities on the Isle of Skye is the lack of affordable housing. The increase in buyouts for holiday cottages and second homes are driving up prices on Skye, and this has huge effects on local residents, who often have to wait for years before they can afford to buy a home.

"The only influence I feel I have – and it comes across as being extremely rude – is when people come looking for a second home. People come down and say: 'Oh, we love it here, we are going to buy a house and let it out', and I say: 'Please don't, you are causing a huge problem, please don't do it'. I feel that is the only influence I have. I write to my MSP and my MP, but all I get back is that there is social housing in Broadford and Portree – but they are completely missing the point. If everyone lives in Broadford or Portree, where is the fish going to come from? Where is the lamb going to come from? Where is the beef going to come from? Who is going to look after the land? People look at everything north of Perth and think that it's an amazing and untouched wilderness, but we have lived and managed the land here for centuries."

– **Hermione Lamond, owner of the Elgol Shop**

Simultaneously, visitors are spending far less time on Skye. Participants explained that where people would have stayed on the island from between 7-10 days in the past, people are now only staying for 2-3 days and try to see everything on Skye during those days. This behaviour is causing pinch-points on local roads and at popular attractions such as the Fairy Pools, and the continuous stream of visitors is creating increasingly stressful conditions for local residents.

⁸ NatureScot (2020): "Record numbers flock to NatureScot's National Nature Reserves in 2020" (read the full article [here](#)).

"When I drive home, every single layby is filled with either tents or campervans in really rubbish parking spots, just pulled up to the side of the road. It's a bit dangerous, and I really don't think it's sustainable. We need better public facilities, camping grounds, signage, and things like that. We want people to enjoy their time on Skye, but we need support from Scottish Government to create an infrastructure that can cope with the actual demand that we have. Rather than just looking at the bigger picture, we need to look at the smaller picture too."

- Deirdre Sarah Curley, Director of Sligachan Hotel

The lack of appropriate infrastructure was the primary concern for the interviewees, who all agreed that the Scottish Government needs to prioritise funding for rural infrastructure.

"We understand why people want to come here, not just this year but every year, but we just don't have the infrastructure in place to cope with the numbers. The amount of money that is spent on advertising and promoting tourism doesn't correspond to the amount of money that is spent on supporting tourism - it is completely unbalanced. People know we're here. You don't need to sell us - you don't need to sell us for a few years. Spend money on fixing all the problems that selling us has created."

- Hermione Lamond, owner of the Elgol Shop

In addition to infrastructure, the interview participants emphasised the importance of advocating slow tourism and decreasing the promotion of tourist hotspots on the Isle of Skye. They also called for a prioritisation of marketing initiatives that encourage multiple night stays on Skye and the use of public transportation to maximise local economic value and minimise the carbon footprint of tourism.

"We should be encouraging visitors to stop and relax and enjoy themselves, sharing pictures of people sitting by the fire in a warm jumper with a cup of coffee or a whisky, relaxing. We should be encouraging that way of travelling rather than tick-box tourism, where people just rush around the countryside and try to see everything in 1 or 2 days."

- Sara MacKinnon, owner of Mrs. Mack's Farm Shop



Sara MacKinnon from Torrin says there has been a big increase in visitor pressures over 2020 © Cecilie Dohm

Finally, the respondents explained that there is a severe lack of respect for the natural landscape and the people, who live and work in the landscape. Consequently, they emphasised the need for a national advertisement campaign to promote awareness of the SOAC, so that visitors can appreciate and enjoy wild places responsibly and with minimal disruption to local communities.

“We need to make people understand why you can't just drop your litter or empty a chemical toilet in a water way, we need to help our visitors build a connection with our landscape and community. It is not just a place to come and take pictures, people live here. You want people to build that connection – I think that this is the best way to do it, instead of just shaking heads and saying ‘no, you can't do that’. If people feel connected to the place, they will respect it.”

– **Ben Oakes, founder of Isle of Skye Seaweed Co.**

5.2 Isle of Lewis and Harris

The John Muir Trust does not own land on the Outer Hebrides but works in close partnership with three community land trusts on Lewis and Harris: Galson Estate Trust (Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn), the West Harris Trust, and the North Harris Trust. While the communities on Lewis and Harris are not experiencing the same levels of visitor numbers as e.g. the Isle of Skye, primarily because the CalMac Ferries put a limit on how many people can come to the Outer Hebrides, they are witnessing a gradual increase in visitor numbers. Thus, interview participants from Lewis and Harris reported growing issues with littering, human waste, road traffic and inappropriate parking at passing places, verges, and other non-designated sites.

“Here we might wait for a fortnight for a single wheelie bin at a beauty point to be emptied, where some visitors might be used to city bins being emptied more frequently. It's very different here, it's remote and the services just aren't as frequent.”

– **Linda Armstrong, Commercial Manager at the West Harris Trust**

The interviewees clarified that local communities on Lewis and Harris are especially concerned about the change in the type of visitors they received over 2020, as many of the growing visitor pressures have been attributed to the recent shift in tourists.

"People have mentioned that we are getting a different kind of tourist this year. In general, a lot of people in the community feel that we are getting more ignorant tourists; ignorant in terms of where they are, who they are visiting, how they are supposed to behave, what their responsibilities are, what they can and cannot do. This year has certainly galvanised the opinion that byelaws are needed to deal with inappropriate ‘wild’ camping.”

– **Michael Hunter, Manager of the North Harris Trust**

Further to this, the interview participants explained that anti-tourism sentiments are spreading among some local people on Lewis and Harris, who are concerned that the Outer Hebrides will suffer the same fate as e.g. the Isle of Skye, or that visitors will bring the coronavirus with them from other areas. The respondents suggested that better infrastructure might help address these attitudes. While the West Harris Trust and North Harris Trust managed to secure funding to put in visitor facilities and campervan hook-up points at Niseaboist Beach and Hushinish Beach, the interviewees explained that the general lack of public toilets and visitor infrastructure on the islands is becoming an increasing problem.

“Unfortunately, the existing infrastructure on Harris was not designed for the volume of visitors that we are now seeing, particularly with the increase in motorhome and camping numbers. Additional support needs to be given by the Local Authority and the Scottish Government to community groups to manage and modernise these facilities.”

– **Rhoda Campbell, owner of Blue Reef Cottages**



Linda Armstrong, Neil Campbell, and Rhoda Campbell outside of Talla na Mara; a Community Enterprise Centre owned and managed by the West Harris Trust on behalf of the local community on West Harris © Cecilie Dohm

Besides the need for better infrastructure, the interview participants highlighted the importance of improving and increasing public education about the SOAC. They also stressed the benefits of rangers, signage, and the potential of involving local people, particularly crofters, in tourism.

"Getting information about wild camping out there is essential, whether it is through schools, universities or campervan hire companies. We need to find a way to engage young audiences, but it should be done in a positive way, emphasising that wild camping is an adventure. Signage and particularly rangers should help address issues with wild camping as well, and I think there is a huge potential in encouraging crofters to see croft camping as a positive opportunity."

– **Neil Campbell, Director of the West Harris Trust**

In terms of marketing, the interviewees advocated for a greater emphasis on the people, history, and unique cultural aspects of the Outer Hebrides, rather than just focussing on the beaches. Finally, they called on the Scottish Government to increase funding and support for rural infrastructure projects.

"We have many miles of remote access routes that just need to be repaired, and it would be wonderful to be able to encourage people to see more of the island, more of North Harris. It is pretty spectacular, but people don't engage with it – everyone just heads off to Lyskentyre or Hushinish Beach for their Instagram picture and that's it. We have lots of projects and plans that are written up, costed and good to go, and which will help spread out some of the visitor pressures, but we don't have the money to do it ourselves and the funding isn't available."

– **Michael Hunter, Manager of the North Harris Trust**

As Lewis and Harris become more popular, pre-emptive action becomes more vital. The community land trusts have a wealth of ideas for how to address the growing issues, including the creation of an app that can share information about the local areas, the history, culture, people, landscape, how to behave, where the nearest toilets are, etc. – they just need support to get the projects off the ground.

"As a result of Covid-19, digital tourism is becoming more popular, and I think that will inspire a lot of people to come up here. Tourists are incredibly beneficial to the local economy – not just for the people who own holiday homes, but also for the shop workers and the cleaners, so we have to be forward thinking. We are not ready for mass tourism yet, but we have a unique opportunity to get it right and put the right infrastructure in place now, so that we can welcome more tourists to the area in the future."

- Christine Amos, Operations Manager at Galson Estate Trust

5.3 Assynt and North West Sutherland

The North Highlands has become one of the most iconic destinations in Scotland after the introduction of the North Coast 500 route in 2015. What began as an initiative to bring new opportunities to one of the least visited parts of Scotland was in 2019 estimated to have boosted the North Highland economy by more than £22 million.⁹ According to a report by the Moffat Centre for Tourism at Glasgow Caledonian University, tourism businesses throughout the North Highlands, including retailers, tour operators, and camper van rental firms, reported year-on-year growth of 16% from 2014-2018. Within five years, the route has thus brought economic benefits to the North Highlands, yet the growth in popularity appears to be happening at the expense of local communities – even those working in the tourism sector.

"Visitors don't have the same connection to the area and the people that I think they used to have. There is very little regard or appreciation for the local communities, who live up here, it's all about the scenery. It's a much faster kind of tourism, which makes it less pleasant to deal with, especially because you end up feeling like you are a hindrance to people's holidays rather than being part of it. Of course it's not everybody, but it is a growing proportion of visitors."

- Helen O'Keefe, crofter and owner of Elphin Tea Rooms

Several interview participants reported that visitor numbers have increased drastically since the introduction of the North Coast 500 route, particularly over the last 2-3 years. They also explained that the North Coast 500 has brought about a change in the type of visitors the area is receiving, as most visitors are staying for a much shorter period of time.

"There has definitely been a change in the type of visitors we are receiving. It used to be people who would come up every year and stay for around a week, but more and more people are only staying for one-night stopovers. My guided walks are not so popular anymore, because now that people are doing the NC500, they are just driving from A to B and don't have any time to stay and explore. If they come to Clachtoll, they get out of the car, take a photo of the beach, and then they drive on."

- Andy Summers, Senior Ranger at High Life Highland

Overall, Assynt and North West Sutherland are struggling to keep pace with the ever-increasing flow of tourists, as the region is lacking in essential visitor infrastructure such as car parks, waste disposal sites, camp sites, public toilets, restaurants, and local accommodation providers.

"One of the main problems is the fact that people come up here without booking in advance. Where else would you do that? You don't arrive in Edinburgh, find out that the hotels have all been booked and ask if you can sleep on their couch, but that is essentially what is happening up here. People don't realise how busy it is. Even if all the hotels and campsites are full, people just keep coming, and then they end up in laybys and on the machair, or they just set up camp in the middle of the village and say: 'Everything was full, what was I supposed to do?'"

- Jorine Van Delft, Hostel Manager of Achmelvich Beach Youth Hostel

⁹ The Northern Times (2019): "NC500 boosts north Highland economy by £22 million" (read the full article [here](#))

Due to the lack of visitor infrastructure, local communities are experiencing increasing problems with inappropriate parking and camping. These pressures escalated in 2020, as many campsites remained closed and others reduced their capacity due to the risk posed by Covid-19. The Trust also witnessed increasing visitor pressures at our properties at Quinag and Sandwood Bay. For instance, our visitor data from Sandwood indicates that we had 1,791 cars at Blairmore car park in August 2020 compared to 842 cars in August 2019. During the busiest days of 2020, we had more than 90 cars at Blairmore car park, which officially only has space for 40 cars. As a result, the area around Sandwood experienced serious congestion on local roads, and campervans were often found parked on areas of protected machair.



Blairmore car park at Sandwood Bay on a weekday in October 2020 © Carrie Weager

"It's important to realise that it is a question of numbers. We have had campervans parked in laybys up here for probably the last 30 years. If there are a few people doing these things then that's okay, but now there are 5 campervans parked in every single layby, every single night. If one person surreptitiously parks on the machair or has a fire on the beach and cleans it up, it's not a problem, but when there are 10 people doing it every single night, it becomes disruptive."

- Sylvia Mackay, General Manager of the Old School Restaurant



Discarded urinal bag and buried waste at Sandwood Bay © Carrie Weager

The interviewees furthermore reported that a growing number of visitors are not abiding by the SOAC and the principle of "leave no trace". Problems with littering, human waste, and chemical waste from campervans are increasing exponentially, and negative impacts from fires and tree cutting are affecting both local communities and sensitive habitats. 2020 was a particularly problematic year, as local rangers were furloughed throughout most of the peak season, when they were most needed.



Sarah-Ann MacLeod explained that local communities feel overwhelmed by visitor pressures © Cecilie Dohm

"People are leaving rubbish everywhere and defecating on the beach and in the dunes. There is toilet paper and wet wipes everywhere. We have had cases of people leaving rubbish in local residents' mailboxes, or people trying to bury their rubbish in the dunes. People at my campsite were avoiding the beach, local people were avoiding the beach – nobody wanted to go down there. It's really disheartening to see, but there is just no way for us to stop it. Local people and members of my staff have been verbally abused when asking people, who parked or camped inappropriately, to move. We have had a campsite here for decades, and the people that have come to my campsite have all been incredibly respectful. Some of them have been coming for decades, but even they are put off by this behaviour. This year has just been the worst I have ever seen. This year made me want to shut down, move away and never come back. If the current trend continues, it will destroy my business and my home, and I don't want to see that."

– Sarah-Ann MacLeod, owner of The Shore Caravan Site

Several interview participants reported that there has been a rise in anti-social visitor behaviour. They explained that local communities feel increasingly overwhelmed by the visitor pressures, and that local residents are becoming frustrated over the sense of entitlement and carelessness that some visitors are exhibiting. As a result, several of the interviewees were therefore in favour of introducing local byelaws as a means to address the growing friction between local residents and visitors.

"Visitors are told repeatedly that they have the right to roam, while local people are told: "you can't stop visitors from doing this, and you can't put up 'no parking' or 'no camping' signs". We need support to stop anti-social visitor behaviour, and we need to be given the right to our own communities. At the moment, it feels like tourists have more right to these communities than the locals in them. There needs to be a message that this behaviour is not acceptable, that this area is not a free-for-all playpark where you can do what you want. We need legislative support and enforcement to stop this behaviour, or it will ruin tourism for everybody, for the locals and the tourists, because it is creating a really hostile environment."

– Helen O'Keefe, owner of Elphin Tea Rooms



Overflowing bins at Blairmore car park © Carrie Weager

Marketing and social media has a major part to play in the rise in visitor numbers. The North Coast 500 has created an alluring narrative of “the ultimate road trip”, promising “fairy-tale castles, white sand beaches, rugged mountains, and historical ruins”.¹⁰ This promotion has captured people’s imagination, and the narrative is perpetuated through social media platforms such as Instagram and the widespread use of hashtags, which direct tourist to certain places.

"People have been sold this amazing road trip through what they are told is a wild, untouched, almost uninhabited landscape, and for a lot of people that is all they see. Some people think that the entire stretch of the NC500 is a whole new road that has been created just for tourists. They don't know the names of the villages they drive through; they are on a whistle-stop tour to get their bucket-list photos, and now people are hitting hotspots like Ardvreck Castle or the Inchnadamph Bone Caves in mass numbers, because social media directs people to particular places. If things continue like this, the great danger is that we just become a backdrop for a generation of Instagram selfies."

- Chris Rix, owner of Inchnadamph Lodge and B&B

Notably, interview participants expressed disappointment over the lack of engagement and accountability from the Highland Council, the Scottish Government and especially the North Coast 500. They also voiced an intense frustration over the lack of community consultation and stressed the importance of involving rural communities in decision-making processes about tourism-related developments that will affect them.

"We were never consulted about the NC500 signs. We were never asked a single question, one day they were just there. The Highland Council, the North Coast 500, the Scottish Government; everyone just keeps pushing the NC500 route, yet none of them are getting involved. I have written several letters to MSPs but have had no feedback. Everyone seems to expect that communities will take care of the infrastructure issue, but I think it is about time that these organisations take responsibility for this thing they have created."

- Diane Keenan-Bokr, artist

¹⁰ North Coast 500 (2020): “North Coast 500: The ultimate road trip” (available online [here](#)).

Many interview participants explained that rural communities are in dire need of administrative and legislative support, and all of them emphasised the urgency of putting in place appropriate infrastructure across Assynt and North West Sutherland. In fact, several of them called on the Scottish Government to deliver basic infrastructure through central funding rather than grant funding. They also called on campervan companies to properly inform tourists of how to drive and navigate single-track roads and how to dispose of waste before hiring out campervans.

"We need support to set up appropriate infrastructure and put in place some kind of destination management plan. We need places for campervans to park safely, places for people to camp safely. We need proper toilet facilities for visitors. This area, traditionally, has not had the money spent on it that it should have, given the size of it. Going forward, it is important to develop this area on par with Inverness and make affordable housing available for local people, get broadband up and working, and diversify the economy to avoid the area becoming completely dependent on tourism."

- Ewen McLachlan, Development Officer at Assynt Development Trust

Communities in Assynt and North West Sutherland recognise that tourism is an essential part of the local economy. All of the interviewees stressed that they were not against tourism, but they strongly emphasised the urgency of advocating slow tourism and increasing education about the SOAC. Several of them also suggested rebranding the region and changing the marketing strategy from a focus on the North Highlands as a route to a place of recuperation, health, and wellbeing.

"It's not that we want to keep it to ourselves, we understand that people want to come up here – we are just not ready to cope with these numbers, day in and day out. We want to encourage people to get out and wild camp and appreciate nature, but they need to be taught how to do it responsibly. VisitScotland and the NC500 need to start listening to local communities, and they need to stop promoting it as a road trip. We are happy to encourage tourism, but not to the detriment of the Highlands."

- Julie Allen, House Manager at Kylestrome Lodge

5.4 Lochaber

The area around Ben Nevis has always been an extremely popular visitor destination. In 2018, it was estimated that around 300,000 people visited Glen Nevis.¹¹ In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of visitors, particularly to the Steall Falls and Ben Nevis, with around 160,000 annual visitors to Ben Nevis in 2018 compared to around 120,000 annual visitors in 2013.¹² Interview participants from Lochaber confirmed that visitor numbers and pressures are increasing year by year, and that the main tourist season is getting busier and lasting longer.

"The area is certainly becoming more and more popular, and in many ways that's very positive. It's bringing money into the local economy and raising the profile of the area, which is great, but the physical volume of visitors is starting to exceed the infrastructure, from the capacity of the road network to the footfall on paths, the amount of litter, and the need for guided walks. Across the board, capacity has been reached and exceeded."

- Rob Cochrane, Seasonal Ranger at Nevis Landscape Partnership

The interviewees explained that local communities are experiencing major issues with increased traffic and congestion on local roads, inappropriate "wild" camping, increased pressures from campervans, fires, and tree cutting. Car parks are also exceeding their capacity, especially at the Steall Falls, and besides parking in passing places and along road verges there is also a spill-over into town. Thus, car parks and off-street parking that would normally be used by local residents are increasingly occupied by tourists. Littering and human waste is another prevalent issue.

¹¹ Nevis Landscape Partnership (2021): "Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund Award" (read the full article [here](#))

¹² John Muir Trust (2021): "Ben Nevis Visitor Number Summary 2006-2021"



Littering and abandoned campfire sites have unfortunately become familiar sights in Glen Nevis © Nathan Berrie

"We keep a record of all the litter we collect, and toilet waste is one of the main issues. We find human waste in laybys, at car parks, or behind boulders on the Ben. There are certain toilet boulders where we always find something, from tissue paper to wet wipes and even sanitary products. People think toilet waste and fruit peelings just degrades, but not with the amount of people on the Ben, there are just too many. It's a pretty grim part of the job, and there are definitely other things that we could be doing as rangers rather than just cleaning up after people."

- Lauren Stewart, Seasonal Ranger at Nevis Landscape Partnership

In general, the interview participants agreed that there has been an increase in visitors, who display a lack of understanding of the SOAC. Impacts were particularly visible after the easing of the first Covid-19 lockdown, with a 40% increase in visitors to Ben Nevis during September 2020, compared to September 2019¹¹.

"The reality is that local people tend to avoid Glen Nevis during the peak season. You get to October and November, and you can almost feel the Glen exhale. The pressure is so immense that you may actually end up losing the essence and the magic of the place, because you are sharing the experience with thousands of other people."

- Gavin MacKenzie, Lecturer at West Highland College UHI

Several of the interview participants from Lochaber stated that Glen Nevis is close to reaching its tipping point. As a result, they stressed the need for more accessible campervan facilities, waste disposal points, and car parks, and called on the Scottish Government to increase ranger services across Glen Nevis and Lochaber.



Overflow vehicles from Steall Falls car park often end up parking along road verges © Nathan Berrie



Litter collected at the summit of Ben Nevis and abandoned campsite in Glen Nevis © Nathan Berrie

"If visitor numbers continue to increase, we are going to need a lot more rangers on the ground, especially in terms of engaging with visitors and helping to manage the pressures around Steall Falls. People have been really receptive to face-to-face engagement, and we have found that it is much easier to get the message through to visitors if you come from a positive perspective. A positive approach gets on the right side of people, and I think it makes people more likely to comply with the SOAC in the future and take that message away with them."

- Lauren Stewart, Seasonal Ranger at Nevis Landscape Partnership

Additionally, the interviewees called on VisitScotland to advocate slow tourism and focus on spreading out visitor numbers geographically, decrease the promotion of tourist hotspots, emphasise the low capacity of rural Scottish roads, and work with campervan hire companies to set realistic expectations for what the average person is able to drive on narrow roads. They also stressed the need for a nation-wide campaign on the SOAC and called on the Scottish Government to increase infrastructure funding and collaboration with local stakeholders.

"Ben Nevis is always going to be a big focal point in terms of visitors, there are always going to be people wanting to climb the highest peak in Britain. We understand that local authorities are under financial pressure in terms of budgets being cut but given that tourism is the biggest economic asset in the Highlands, we have to think beyond just increasing tourism and focus on protecting the sustainability of the places that we want people to come and visit and explore. That requires local councils and Government to back it up with appropriate infrastructure and funding and engage meaningfully with local stakeholders, businesses and communities."

- Mark Gibbings, Marketing & Project Manager at Lochaber Chamber of Commerce

Last but not least, the interview participants emphasised the value of education and outdoor learning as an integral aspect of helping both visitors and local people build a connection to the area and engage with it in a meaningful and responsible way.

"When we talk about visitor pressures around places like Glen Nevis, we have to consider long-term planning. For me, the most important thing is that we prioritise education for children and young people and teach them how to value and protect not just places like Glen Nevis and what we consider to be wild places, but our local places too, like the green spaces in the middle of our towns and cities. We need to give teachers the confidence to take learning outside, and we need to provide young people with the opportunities to get outside and experience nature."

- Gavin MacKenzie, Lecturer at West Highland College UHI

5.5 Highland Perthshire

With more than 20,000 people ascending the summit every year, Schiehallion is one of the most popular and iconic Munros in Highland Perthshire. The John Muir Trust owns and manages the eastern part of Schiehallion and monitors visitor numbers through a people counter at the start of the Schiehallion path. Our data indicates that visitor numbers have gradually increased over the years, and while there was a significant drop in visitors during the first lockdown of 2020, numbers came to a head after the restrictions were eased. Thus, we recorded 6,293 people in August 2020 compared to 2,581 people in August 2019, and there were twice as many visitors in September and October 2020 as well. Interview participants from around Schiehallion and Kinloch Rannoch also attested to the increase in visitor numbers.

"The fire service provides patrols of the camping area. In 2019, we counted 122 camping sites during the busiest weekend, and in 2020 that number increased to 174 camping sites. Those numbers are probably a low estimate, because we generally stop patrolling about 7pm at night, and even then there are still folk circulating on the road, looking for camp sites, so those aren't definitive figures. I know people have said that this is because of Covid, but I think that's only a contributing factor. The numbers have been increasing year on year, regardless of Covid."

- James Black, Crew Commander at Kinloch Rannoch Community Fire Station

Alongside the increase in visitor numbers, the interviewees reported that there has been a rise in issues with inappropriate "wild" camping and roadside parking, fires, littering, flytipping, and human waste. They also explained that a growing proportion of visitors are not abiding by the SOAC and that many visitors appear to be unfamiliar with the responsibilities that come with the "right to roam". In response to this, the Loch Rannoch Conservation Association, and several other groups – including Greenspace Rangers, Community Safety Wardens, Forestry and Land Scotland, Scottish Fire, and other local community volunteers – worked together to organise regular visitor engagement in the area throughout 2020.

"Every weekend we go out to the campsites to talk to people about the SOAC. It's just a friendly chat and it's been met with a positive response; we ask them where they are from, we talk to them about behaving responsibly, and then we give them a leaflet. Most visitors will tell us that they understand the SOAC, and that they will leave the place clean and tidy, but post-visitor experience shows that is not always the case, and we do come across completely abandoned campsites, where tents, chairs, mattresses, sleeping bags, you name it, everything has just been left behind and we have to clean it all up."

- Stephen Roworth, Conservation Officer at Loch Rannoch Conservation Association

Another particular issue that greatly affects local people is the increase in cars on the single-track road leading up to Schiehallion. While the Trust maintains the main footpath up to the Munro, the Braes of Foss car park at Schiehallion is owned and managed by Forestry and Land Scotland. Visitor numbers have long since surpassed the car park's official capacity of 25 spaces, and overflow vehicles parked along the verges on the single-track road are increasingly causing disruption. In summer 2020, Trust rangers often recorded between 100 and 200 cars parked alongside the road, and Perth and Kinross Council ended up designating the road as a clearway, with penalty charge notices given to cars parked irresponsibly.

"Visitor numbers are becoming so severe that the road leading to the Braes of Foss car park is continuously being blocked by overflow vehicles, which means that locals can't get through, timber wagons and farm vehicles can't get through, and more importantly emergency vehicles and fire engines can't get through. This is creating a potentially really dangerous situation, because if there is a fire or an emergency, I won't be able to get the fire engine through."

- James Black, Crew Commander at Kinloch Rannoch Community Fire Station



Cars parked alongside the single-track road leading to the Braes of Foss car park at Schiehallion © Liz Auty

In addition to the infrastructure problem at Schiehallion, the interviewees explained that there is a general lack of visitor infrastructure like car parks, public toilets, and waste disposal points around Kinloch Rannoch and particularly at Loch Rannoch. Further to this, the interviewees emphasised the importance of making funding for rural infrastructure more accessible to local communities. They also called on the Scottish Government to expand local ranger services, increase police enforcement, and provide dedicated information about the SOAC.

"Community consultation is key; the Scottish Government and VisitScotland need to listen to rural communities, who are being affected by increasing visitor pressures. We need funding and support to put in adequate visitor facilities such as toilets, litter bins and car parks, and we need to increase education about the SOAC in order to encourage more responsible behaviour."

– **Anonymous**

Several interview participants thus suggested producing a nation-wide advertisement campaign on TV to raise awareness of the SOAC, and some recommended revising and updating the SOAC to address and encompass the two separate types of camping, i.e. wild and roadside camping.

"I think it's great that people are discovering the Scottish countryside. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown how important nature is for people's mental health and wellbeing, and I really don't think that we should discourage people from getting out into nature. That being said, there is of course only so much the area can cope with in terms of people lighting fires and leaving litter all over the place, so we do need a more managed approach without deterring visitors."

– **Bob Benson, member of Rannoch Community Trust**

As part of a green recovery from Covid-19, several interview participants stressed the importance of education and teaching people to have respect, not only for the countryside but for the country as a whole, from an early age. The interviewees therefore called on Local Authorities to maintain youth and community initiatives that enable children and young people to get out and connect with the natural environment, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

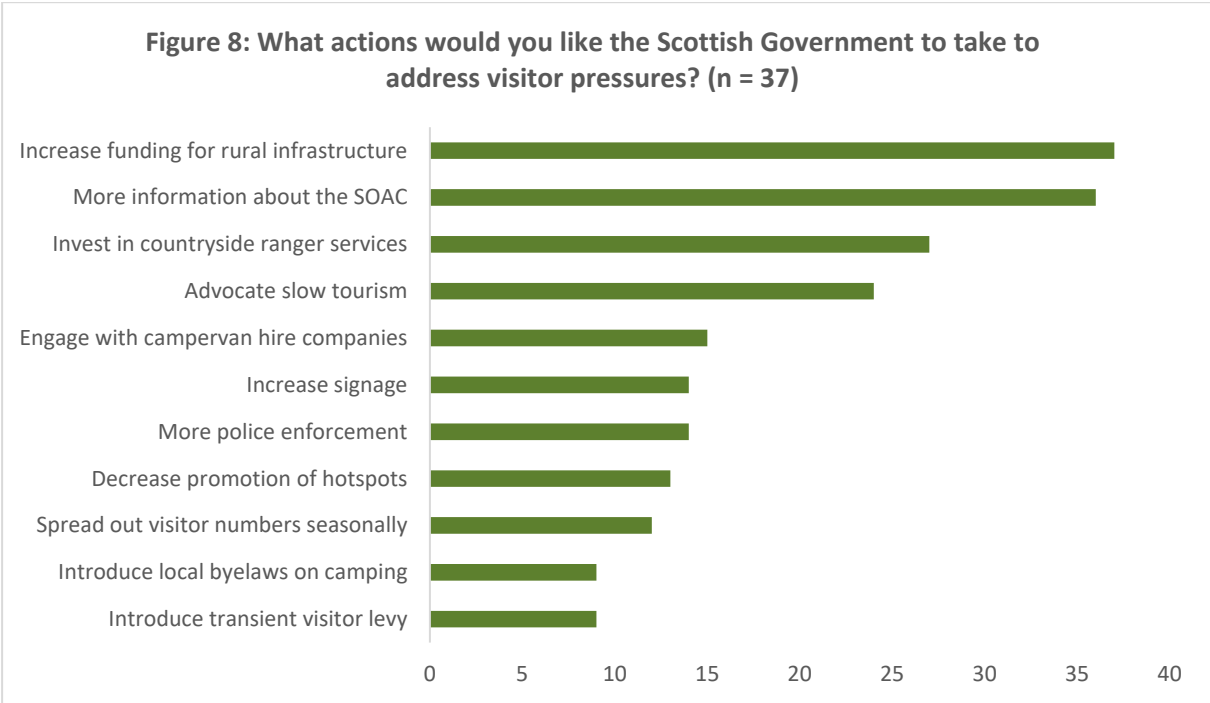
"Tourism is incredibly important to our local area, but we need to find a balance between the conservation side of things and the access side of things. Besides providing people with public toilets and places to empty motorhome toilets, I think we really need to focus on education. In particular, I think we really need to focus on children and young people and provide them with opportunities to get out and experience wild places and learn how to care for nature."

– **Anne Benson, runs Rannoch Paths and Open Space Group**

6. Policy and practical recommendations

The tourism sector is an important and growing part of many rural economies in Scotland, but we now need the right investment and resources in place to spread out benefits and impacts more widely. The Trust welcomes VisitScotland’s new tourism strategy, Scotland Outlook 2030, and its emphasis on people, places, businesses, and experiences, however, 2020 has shown us that there are many issues that need to be addressed before we can hope to call ourselves a “world-leader in 21st century tourism”.¹³

When asked what actions they would like to see taken to address current visitor pressures, the interview participants listed several different solutions. These actions were grouped into main categories, as seen below (figure 8). The bar graph highlights which actions were mentioned most frequently during the interviews, with “increase funding for rural infrastructure”, “more information about the SOAC”, “invest in countryside ranger services”, and “advocate slow tourism” being the most prevalent actions.



Based on the feedback we received from interview participants and drawing on our experience as land managers, the Trust suggests the following policy and practical solutions to help facilitate pre-emptive action ahead of Spring and Summer 2021.

6.1 Actions for Scottish Government

- As part of a green recovery from Covid-19, develop strategic targeting of funding for rural infrastructure, directing it to where it is most needed.
- Work with NatureScot and produce a national advertisement campaign in 2021 to promote awareness of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) and the principle of “leave no trace”, so that people can appreciate and enjoy wild places responsibly and without disruption to rural communities.

¹³ VisitScotland (2020): “New tourism strategy announced” (read the full article [here](#)).

- Conduct research to gather behavioural insights into the attitudes and understanding amongst new visitors to tourism hotspots.
- Develop an easy and accessible checklist for wild camping based on the SOAC.
- Support the creation of Destination Management Plans that put local communities at the heart of tourism developments and balance community, environmental, and economic impacts and benefits.
- Emphasise community participation and consultation in planning visitor management.
- Prioritise investment in countryside ranger services to inform and encourage visitors and locals to respect wild places.
- Commission an assessment of the full social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism to inform the planning and development of tourism, in accordance with Scotland Outlook 2030.
- Engage with campervan hire companies and make sure that they provide tourists with appropriate guidance on the SOAC, how to drive and navigate single track roads and how to dispose of waste before hiring out campervans.
- Invest in sustainable public transport such as electric shuttle busses to outdoor sites in order to reduce carbon emissions from car journeys, in accordance with the Scottish Government's Climate Change Plan.

6.2 Actions for VisitScotland

- Advocate slow tourism and prioritise marketing initiatives that encourage multiple night stays and the use of public transport in order to maximise local economic value and minimise the carbon footprint of tourism.
- Enhance the emphasis on the SOAC and make the guidelines more visible and accessible online (look to VisitIceland¹⁴ and VisitNorway¹⁵ for inspiration).
- Increase the promotion of Scotland as a tourism destination in autumn and winter to spread-out visitor numbers seasonally.
- Decrease the promotion of tourist hotspots like the Isle of Skye and the North Coast 500, and instead increase the promotion of lesser-known places to spread-out visitor numbers geographically.
- Encourage local spending to boost rural economies.

6.3 Actions for Local Authorities

- Consult with local communities when developing plans for new tourism developments.
- Decentralise infrastructure funding and extend expenditure to local areas struggling with visitor pressures.
- Support the creation of Destination Management Plans that put local communities at the heart of tourism developments and balance community, environmental, and economic impacts and benefits.

6.4 Actions for local communities

- Plan pre-emptive action rather than reactionary responses.
- Push forward with initiatives such as local waste disposal sites.
- Advocate for increased rural representation on local authority levels.

¹⁴ The VisitIceland website includes a dedicated section to the "Iceland Academy", which teaches tourists the most essential things they need to know before visiting Iceland, including what to wear, how to drive, how to travel responsibly, how to camp responsibly, and how to take safe selfies (see more [here](#)).

¹⁵ Similar to VisitIceland, the VisitNorway website includes a dedicated section that thoroughly explains both the joys and responsibilities of "allmansrett", i.e. the right to roam (see more [here](#)).

6.5 Actions for the John Muir Trust

- Promote responsible access alongside the images we share of Trust properties that have become popular tourist destinations, such as Sandwood Bay and Bla Bheinn.
- Help local communities lobby Scottish Government on visitor management issues, e.g. around public toilets and waste disposal sites.
- Increase public communication about the SOAC via rangers, signage, and information boards, as well as through the Trust's website and social media.
- Advocate for greater awareness of the SOAC through our engagement work, particularly the John Muir Award and Junior Ranger Programme.
- Continue to maintain paths and provide facilities and information boards at Trust land.
- Include rural communities in conservation and land management plans.
- Increase guided walks on Trust land to help people become more aware and appreciative of wild places and coordinate work with partner organisations like the Nevis Landscape Partnership and the North West Highlands Geopark.



The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund helped to provide interpretation at Sandwood Bay © David Balharry

7. Conclusion

Tourism brings financial benefits to both the local and national economy, but growing visitor numbers are creating challenges for remote and rural communities and wild places across Scotland. Throughout and beyond this research, the John Muir Trust has received significant feedback from local community representatives regarding the impacts of increasing seasonal visitor pressures in parts of Scotland. While they understand the need to maintain and nurture tourism initiatives, local communities feel strongly that existing levels of investment in rural infrastructure is inadequate and unable to deal with the rising numbers and pressures.

2021 is likely to bring about more challenges, and our research has shown that there is a clear need to take urgent action to reduce negative impacts on both local people and the natural environment. If we are to successfully navigate our way through the Covid-19 crisis, we need to empower rural communities and ensure that they have a valid voice in the key decision-making processes that affect them. The Trust believes that we can change from focussing primarily on economic benefits, and reactively trying to manage negative impacts, to enabling positive benefits for rural communities, local economies, and the natural environment. It is a challenge, but with the right policies in place we believe that it will be possible to achieve responsible tourism for a sustainable future.

8. Contact information

If you have any questions about this report or our research, please feel free to get in touch with the John Muir Trust's Policy Officer or Senior Policy Officer:

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Guided walk along a Schiehallion contour line © Helen Mason

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Linda Armstrong	Commercial Manager at the West Harris Trust
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Rhoda Campbell	Owner of Blue Reef Cottages
Michael Hunter	Manager of the North Harris Trust
Helen O'Keefe	Crofter and owner of Elphin Tea Rooms
Jorine Van Delft	Hostel Manager of Achmelvich Beach Youth Hostel
Sarah-Ann MacLeod	Owner of The Shore Caravan Site
Andy Summers	Senior Ranger at High Life Highland
Ewen McLachlan	Development Officer at Assynt Development Trust
Dave McBain	Owner of Davar Bed and Breakfast
David Slator	Crofter and owner of Airbnb
Chris Rix	Owner of Inchnadamph Lodge and B&B
Catherine Sinclair	Owner of Kylesku Lodges
Diane Keenan-Bokr	Artist
Julie Allen	House Manager and Cook at Kylestrome Lodge
Cathal Morrison	Crofter and owner of two holiday cottages
Sylvia Mackay	General Manager of the Old School Restaurant
Tanya Morrison	Owner of the Worth a Look Café
Rob Cochrane	Seasonal Ranger at Nevis Landscape Partnership
Michael Cooke	Director of Glen Nevis Holidays
Lauren Stewart	Seasonal Ranger at Nevis Landscape Partnership
Gavin MacKenzie	Lecturer at West Highland College UHI
Mark Gibbings	Marketing and Project Manager at Lochaber Chamber of Commerce
Anne Benson	Retired, chair of Rannoch Paths and Open Space Group
Bob Benson	Retired, member of Rannoch Community Trust
Richard Paul	Retired, advisor to Highland Perthshire Communities Land Trust
James Black	Crew Commander at Kinloch Rannoch Community Fire Station
Stephen Roworth	Conservation Officer at Loch Rannoch Conservation Association
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Jez Robinson	Farmer and landowner
Mandy Bailey	Owner of Braes Lodge



Image: Rangers and volunteers carry down litter from the summit of Ben Nevis © Nathan Berrie

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