

Our Position on Visitor Management

This document outlines our position on the benefits and challenges of visitors to wild places in the UK.

Trust position

1. Tourism brings financial benefits to both the local and national economy, but over-tourism is creating challenges for local communities and wild places. The Trust draws on its experience as a land manager, and its interest in wild places throughout the UK more widely, to highlight the impacts from visitor pressures and to propose policy solutions.

Policy context and history of the issue

2. Tourism brings vital income to remote, rural communities, but there can also be negative impacts from high visitor numbers, especially when they are concentrated in particular places. Roads can get clogged up with traffic, parking areas get full and people park in dangerous places or cause obstruction for local people. Litter and human waste are also becoming an increasing problem, whilst popular footpaths suffer without investment.
3. These impacts have been aggravated by the sharing of “must see” sites on social media, whilst local government cuts in public toilet provision, bin collections and countryside ranger services have also contributed to the problem. Communities in particularly popular places can feel “under siege” – for example, parts of Skye and places along the North Coast 500 route are increasingly struggling with visitor pressures and anti-social behaviour.
4. In the absence of adequate national and local authority funding and resources, maintaining the quality of the visitor experience and dealing with the impacts often puts a substantial burden on volunteers from local community groups, community land trusts and conservation charities. Communities, landowners and land managers are increasingly encouraged to take on infrastructure such as car parks or toilets. With limited funding available and competitive funding application rounds, there is a risk of funds being diverted to places where communities can coordinate action, rather than necessarily to communities where funding is most needed.
5. The Scottish Government has previously consulted on powers for local authorities to apply a ‘transient visitor levy’ (otherwise known as a tourist tax) on visitors staying overnight. Tourist taxes are levied in many countries - typically a small fee is added to the cost of overnight accommodation - which can then be used to invest in tourist facilities to ensure visitors have a positive experience as well as to reduce the impacts that tourists can have on an area.
6. After Covid-19 restrictions on travel were lifted later in 2020 there was a massive increase in domestic visitors to rural and coastal areas across the UK, which resulted in widespread and unprecedented pressures. As a response to visitor pressures in Scotland, the Scottish Government established the Visitor Management Strategy Steering Group, which consists of members from NatureScot, VisitScotland, Police Scotland, Forestry & Land Scotland, Transport Scotland, local authorities and the

National Parks¹. The Steering Group has invited representatives from public sector agencies, local authorities and NGOs (including the Trust) to Visitor Management Summits throughout 2020 and 2021 to share updates on actions taken and to determine what more can be done to mitigate future issues.

Why we care/relevance to the Trust

7. One focus of the Trust's work is to inspire people to experience the benefits of wild places (which include physical, psychological and educational benefits). In doing so we hope to increase the likelihood that people will value wild places and will want to protect and repair them.
8. The Trust cares for seven mountain and coastal properties and has experience managing visitor pressures at some of our properties – for example on Ben Nevis, the UK's highest peak; on Skye, where we are responsible for a number of tourist "hot spots" and gateways into the Cuillin mountains; and at Sandwood Bay, where increasing numbers of people have been visiting due to the popularity of the North Coast 500 marketing campaign. For six years the Trust managed Glenridding Common which means we also have experience managing high visitor numbers in England's Lake District National Park.²
9. We work with local and national government, local communities, community land-owning organisations, businesses, and public agencies to manage visitors in these areas. The Trust's contributions include:
 - Investing more than £500,000 in the past five years to repair footpaths in partnership with local communities and businesses (largely unsupported by government funding).
 - Installing composting toilets and upgrading car parking facilities at several locations; some of this is supported by the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund.
 - Providing visitor interpretation at our properties.
 - Providing ranger services on Trust land.
10. The Trust has received significant feedback from rural communities on the impact of increasing seasonal visitor pressures in parts of Scotland.³ While they understand the need to maintain the benefits of tourism, they are also increasingly concerned that the existing levels of infrastructure investment in some of the more popular areas is inadequate and unable to deal with the numbers and pressures. There is a clear need to reduce negative impacts on local people, the quality of visitor experience and the natural environment.

Policy solution

11. Based on recommendations from the Visitor Management Strategy Steering Group, lobbying from eNGOs and outcries from local communities, the Scottish Government increased investment in visitor management in 2021. For example, the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) for 2021-22 doubled to £6.2 million, the National Parks'

¹ VisitScotland (2021), 'Visitor Management: Scotland's Action Plan': <https://www.visitscotland.org/about-us/what-we-do/working-in-partnership/visitor-management-plan>

² <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/whats-new/news/1522-trust-steps-back-from-glenridding-common-tendering-process>

³ See Trust Report '[Frontline Realities: Rural Communities and Visitor Pressures](https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/whats-new/news/748-frontline-realities-rural-communities-and-visitor-pressure)': <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/whats-new/news/748-frontline-realities-rural-communities-and-visitor-pressure>

budget increased by £3.6 million in 2021, and a total of £3.2 million was allocated to 125 projects in 2021 through NatureScot's Better Places Green Recovery Fund.

12. While increased government funding and cross-organisational collaboration across Scotland has brought numerous improvements in recent years (e.g. through temporary facilities, the presence of seasonal rangers and wardens and co-ordinated high-impact communications campaigns), there are still several issues that need to be tackled. Significant resources are going into enforcement activity (e.g. parking, littering, fire lighting, anti-social behaviour), visitor traffic is increasing, water safety and wildfire risks are increasing, and continued funding is needed to resource seasonal staff and temporary facilities (while RTIF projects are delivered).
13. For England and for Wales there are similar pressures on popular sites particularly within designated landscapes. As part of our advocacy for visitor management at very popular wild places in England, we support sustained funding for Ranger programmes with the National Park Authorities and awareness raising campaigns that promote the Countryside Code to encourage respectful behaviours that enable all visitors to fully enjoy and benefit from these wild places. In exceptional cases we would argue for National Park Authorities or Local Authorities to use enforcement powers to manage visitor pressures as a last resort, where a problem is recurring, and public awareness is not offering a solution, but we are also clear that this should be a last resort.
14. In addition to devolved Government and statutory body responses to visitor pressures, local communities need to be more involved in deciding what type and quantity of visitors they and the wild places around them can sustain. We would like to see the UK develop an internationally renowned approach to the destination management of wild places: one that puts local communities at the heart of tourism plans and balances community, environmental and economic impacts and benefits. Destination management plans would need to be developed with full community ownership and engagement and should include full consideration of the scope for investment across wider, regional areas to fund landscape-scale restoration projects for the multiple public benefits that would be delivered.
15. A tourist tax could play a role in addressing visitor pressures on both communities and the environment, but only if part of a wider tourism strategy that is based on an ethos of environmental sustainability. Funds raised should be spent in areas of most genuine need, emphasising the importance of full community consultation and participation in planning the management of visitors⁴. Funds could support investment in important but appropriate tourist infrastructure such as footpaths, in addition to engagement and education through visitor information points and ranger services, all of which would help to manage and mitigate adverse visitor impacts whilst improving the quality of visitor experience.
16. Wildlife, adventure and landscape tourism could include an element of "giving back" in terms of volunteering or donating towards the ecological management and restoration of the wild land on which the tourism depends.
17. "Slow tourism" marketing initiatives should be prioritised to encourage multiple night stays, the use of public transport, cycleways and footpaths to maximise local economic value and minimise the carbon footprint of tourism.

⁴ Existing partnerships such as the Nevis Landscape Partnership and the Northwest Highlands Geopark are two examples of organisations with direct and local experience that can help make a difference.

Policy outcomes

18. The Trust hopes to see the following future policy outcomes:

- A truly sustainable tourism industry around the UK's wild places.
- Communities are empowered to address negative impacts of visitor numbers.
- The UK's wild places do not suffer adverse impacts from visitor pressures; instead, tourists, residents, the natural environment and local economies benefit from ambitious programmes of landscape-scale restoration which help to address the climate and biodiversity crises.

Publication approved by Trustees: December 2023

Date last updated: November 2023