

Carron Valley Forest – Recreation Strategy 2006 – 2009 Draft

Summary

The Recreation Strategy for CV incorporates the stated needs and aspirations of Local Authorities, interest groups, existing users, and FCS into one document. It is the means by which the Vision can be substantially realised over the next twenty years.

The main thrust of the strategy is to deliver a mini-escape experience for typical users living within one hour travel:

- short route loops to offer various combinations for a 1-3hr visits in variety of scenery, views, woodland types
- variety of activities to enjoy by waymarked trails and/or information for users eg walking, sitting, archaeology, medieval history & re-enactments, cycling, horseriding, wildlife viewing points

In CVDG view any vision should have ambition. Perhaps the term 'mini-escape' doesn't quite encapsulate the full potential of Carron. The current visitor profile is already in the range 1-3 hrs indeed we have talked to many people who have walked in and climbed Meikle Bin from the East car park or, the entire ridge area above Kilsyth from the Tak Ma Doon car park then back round by the loch. Individually, either of these two walks require the best part of a day. Even given the much larger distances that can be covered by bike, the mtb potential at Carron is huge. It does not, therefore, require a quantum leap in the imagination to envisage more of these walkers, mtb enthusiasts, Fishermen, Horse riders, Twitchers, Fort visitors and most importantly - whole families, spending the entire day at Carron engaging in a wide range of activities.

Aside from the aforementioned, the reasons we cite for this are:

- i.) The increased 'range of attractions' which are, or will be, available to the public.
- ii.) The complimentary nature of these. MTB / Fishing / Horse riding etc are often practiced by but are mutually exclusive to couples or indeed families. A family will be able to visit Carron for a day out and each can do different things. The scale of Carron should allow differing and often competing interests to co exist
- iii.) Water – people are drawn to it and on to it. Carron Valley Fishery could easily capitalise on the fishing business and the now established, steady stream of mtb visitors, by promoting fly fishing lessons, boat trips, sailing and or canoe hire. CV reservoir is the largest expanse of inland water in Central / Southern Scotland and there should be more than enough space to make this work. For example, even windsurfing and fly fishing have proven to be able to co exist on a loch which is a fraction the size of Carron (Lochore Meadows in Fife) This is a great opportunity.
- iv.) Proximity to and potential linkages with other nearby 'tourist attractions': Falkirk Wheel, Stirling Castle, Millenium Link are all huge draws. Again, there are opportunities to explore this. For example: A enterprising canal operator or hotelier at Auchinstarry could collaborate with any on site café / bike shop on a bike bus out to Carron – a day off sailing the canals to try your hand at mtb?

- v.) It's been said countless times: Scale and proximity to large local populations and a vast geographical area.
- vi.) The opportunity to rekindle the tradition of going into the nearest hills (albeit with more than just hill walking to participate in.) As Rena Tarwinska has pointed out – increased use of a local resource. The phrase that invariably pops up when describing CV is 'hidden gem.' It is now slightly ironic in the context of the CVP that two of the factors which have made this so were: intense forestation and a policy of 'protecting the public water supply.'

Fortunately, policy has now changed on both fronts however, what has been almost forgotten is that just a few generations ago these hills were the stomping grounds of thousands of working class Glaswegians. The great hill walking and climbing tradition which is rooted in the West of Scotland was born out of ordinary folk who took to clambering over Meikle Bin and The Campsies on their one day off work. They came because they had no cars and it was near to where they lived. Time has moved on but one fundamental principle remains: CV is so near to countless thousands of people. Provide a quality recreational facility and it will become very well attended.

Using the Forest Design Plan approved in 2005, the planned dates of felling have been compared to the various access and environmental improvements, and timings suggested to integrate the two aspects.

The strategy is a working document from which programmes of work can be derived and effected by the Carron Valley Partnership.

It will be reviewed by FCS every three years with the progress of the Partnership in achieving the vision, and any changes in approach as appropriate.

Background:

- Recreation facilities at Carron Valley were installed in the late 1970s as part of an early recognition by FC of the value of national forest estate for use by the public - carpark, toilet block and a low key picnic site. Since then there has been no further development, the old toilet has gone and the economic, social, and political climate has changed greatly.
- There is a history of successful partnerships between FCS in general and other agencies, and more recently, between FCS and community groups. These groups can be divided roughly into two types, special interest and those living locally.
- The annual 'subsidy' by Scottish Executive to FES to manage the national forest estate on behalf of Scottish taxpayers is c£25M, equivalent to £5 per person per year, or the price of a fish supper. Treasury is unlikely to increase the UK monies for forestry, and FCS has already prepared for a flatline budget for the next three years.

- Recreation infrastructure throughout the national forest estate needs modernising or replacing, and this programme will cost many £M, that currently FCS does not have.

FCS position is understood by CVDG

- Carron Valley Forest is recognised as well located to deliver aspects of the Scottish Executive's Health & Wellbeing programmes, particularly by developing opportunities for recreation by the general public, but also for schools activities and organised events.

We agree, though we think much more effort should be made at strategic level to bring this to the SE attention. Falkirk, North Lanarkshire, Stirling and East Dumbarton schools / Social Work Depts are all now using CV for mtb visits. This will grow when the trail network expands and the toilet facilities are completed. Also, and it's perhaps not popular amongst so called 'tourism experts' to say so but CVDG suggest the CVP need to consider Tourism seriously in the context of Carron Valley:

Fintry is a tourist destination, it is 10 minutes away. It has a campsite, a large prestige hotel, pubs, restaurants, Bed and Breakfast's. Stirling is a major tourist destination – unequivocally so. It is also 10 minutes away. Kilsyth is a tourist destination - at least Auchinstarry is anyway as thousands of tourists pass through on canal barge charters every year. Kilsyth is also 10 minutes away. It's worth flagging up that Lanarkshire Tourism Marketing Partnership are making strenuous efforts to put Lanarkshire on the Tourism map. Given Lanarkshires well documented industrial and social dimension, these are efforts which are deserving of collaboration and support. Falkirk is a tourist destination – Millennium Wheel? Falkirk is also 10 minutes away. Last but not least there is Glasgow: second to only ██████ in the UK as a short break destination. A city of International repute, a city that has every chance of hosting the Commonwealth Games, in 2014. Glasgow city centre is 30 minutes from Carron Valley.

As far as we know, Duncarron is all but unique (at least it is in Scotland.) Alan Moyes is better qualified to point out the USP's, quality etc.

CVDG has very impressive feedback on the mtb trails and the feedback indicates, quite emphatically, that people wish to see 'more of the same.' CVDG wish to build the highest quality trails - trails that will last. Carron Valley has many attributes which allow us to design a unique mtb experience – waterfalls, rivers, big country feel etc. CVDG have spent hundreds of hours putting together mtb trail proposals – proposals that will be world class. Experience elsewhere has shown that riders with cars (but more importantly, the readily available public transport which Carron almost uniquely has) will travel to visit other centres.

For the reasons outlined above it doesn't require much imagination to envisage Tourists coming to Carron Valley.

- There is an understood and recorded demand for access improvements in Carron Valley forest. Consultation of forest users was done summer 04 on site, and at the NLC-led Touch & Campsie Hills Workshop in [27th January 2005](#) at which Carron Valley Forest became the focus for aspirations to improve access and recreation opportunities in the area as a whole.

- Clanranald and CV Development Group are already developing facilities including a toilet block in the forest, and there is a variety of events held during the year. The purpose built mountainbike trails built 05 are being well used, with first year visitor numbers forecast to be 10-12k, based on the first 6 weeks after launch at end Mar 06.

CVDG are forecasting 15k p.a based on a just 4km of built track with no toilets, no facilities, little marketing etc. 20k should easily be possible with a little promotional effort. In an industry where visitor numbers are crucial to further funding etc, CVDG have learned that unless people are counted going through turnstiles etc, the figures for some 'tourist attractions' tend to get talked up – often in a very big way. CVDG figures are verifiable because they are based on electronic counters positioned on each trail – we have hourly counts. Similarly, the website forum is a live model which tells us exactly what people think and the design of the feedback form is designed so that they tell us exactly what they like / don't like, what they want and what they don't like. A live forum is a double edged sword and doing it like this sometimes produces discussions which are best not aired in public and answers we don't want to hear but fortunately these instances are very rare and it's important we know about the bad as well as the good.

So far this has proved that we've got it 99% right and that the CVP are therefore developing trails which people really like and which they want to see much more of.

- Clanranald aim to develop their leased area into a major draw for visitors by way of replica mediaeval fort, craft working, re-enactments of living, construction, and fighting, skills training, and as an teaching resource for schools.

Duncarron appears has great potential

- Four Local Authorities have boundaries within, or adjacent to, Carron Valley forest. North Lanarkshire, Stirling, and Falkirk Councils actively support developments at Carron Valley forest, and the three Councils have already effected access improvements, and/or contributed to such work.

We'd like to see Falkirk Council become more involved. As has been pointed out previously, FC schools are already using the facility. Politically it may be more difficult for FC because it's slightly off pitch however there are infrastructure improvements (roads, cycle routes to CV etc.) where FC could be making a valuable contribution. FC residents are as near to CV as both SC or NLC residents and so it would be of value to have this pointed out to them at a senior level – perhaps by reps from SC and NLC? The same applies to EDC. Richard Barton & Niall Thomson will raise this with Dennis Canavan. DC is not only a local MSP he also chairs the CPG on Sport.

Scottish Water is supportive of appropriate access improvements around the Loch, but are not in a position to offer significant funding.

Improvements around the loch have effectively become a statutory obligation under the new Land Reform Act however, we have asked Geoff Brown to make overtures to SW and to consider a more collaborative approach visa vi the 'lochside trail.' SW have a great potential sponsorship opportunity at CV. All things being equal and with FCS permission to develop the loch trail, further mtb trails and to host sporting events at CV, CVDG are of the view that SW can generate a lot of positive publicity through its association with MTB trails etc.

The Vision

Discussions between the various partners over the last two years, and FCS' Design & Interpretation Services, have produced the Vision Statement:

Vision

That Carron Valley is known as a 'big country wilderness experience near my house' and offers a range of activities & experiences of a quality to exceed expectations of users on every visit.

CVDG understand the thinking behind this, but have a difficulties with the words: 'near my house' We consider it essential this wording is changed to something more along the lines of Roberts Hunters suggestion (for that matter, Roberts suggestion would be just fine)

Achieving the Vision

There are several strands to this vision:

- I. The landscape at large & small scale
- II. the environment ie habitats and the wildlife of the area
- III. the atmosphere or 'sense of place' and how it is conserved, managed and interpreted
- IV. infrastructure including signage and information, that helps the visitor have a safe and enjoyable experience, and is in keeping with the attributes above

Michael Wall raised the subject of an integrated signage solution – we agree entirely. We understand CR need to have an identifiable brand. CVDG also need one for the mtb trails however, we are signed up to making this sit within the CV context as a whole. Our earlier suggestion of 'Wildcat Trails' was unfortunately not picked up and has now been 'pinched' by a community mtb development at Golspie. Ce la vie. The idea / phrase 'Kelpie Trails' is still kicking around the ether but has not really been fully explored. The word Kelpie has been adopted within a multi million pound canal development at Falkirk – clearly it has some currency. We'd like to return back to discussing all this asap, we are planning to build another 1.6km of trail very shortly and its important this aspect is not left to drift.

- V. managing needs and expectations of different user groups to provide a safe enjoyable visit for all, and at the same time be sustainable and manageable by FCS with or without continuing support from partners.
- VI. Optimising business opportunities to address needs and expectations of users, and develop the local economy

The café feasibility study is being put forward by Leader+ for funding application on 29th August. At L+ request CVDG have submitted background information to assist the consultant appointed to undertake the study.

- VII. the timescale for effectively achieving it
- VIII. resources for construction and maintenance
- I. **The landscape at large & small scale**

- 1) The setting and approach roads to Carron Valley begins the wilderness experience for the visitor. All three county roads (factually correct of course but worth remembering that there are in fact 5 approaches to CV) are relatively narrow, and wind their way through upland landscapes. Although only twenty minutes from the main roads of the central belt and Stirling area, the journey builds a feeling of escape from town or city to an upland sheepfarming countryside. The Carron Valley Reservoir with the forest surrounding it and a backdrop of open hill evokes the atmosphere of a Highland glen. The approved Forest Design Plan (FDP) develops this Highland atmosphere as part of the overall future management of the forest. The Plan is already being actioned, and clearfelling and replanting will be a continuing part of the shifting mosaic of the forest over the years. Although the Plan envisions the forest felling and replanting over many years, it is reviewed every five years to incorporate developing best practice and new information.
- 2) Smaller scale improvements, such as clearing viewpoints, and trailside management are also needed, but this is outside the scope of the FDP, and of the usual forest operations. Opportunities will be taken to action smallscale work as part of any larger operation nearby. Appropriate work has been identified and described in the summary workplan 'Achieving the Vision' **App 1**, and is shown as points 6 on the map **App 2**.

CVDG have many ideas they would like to add to this. We aim to do so as part of on going discussions with all members and in develop our project plans.

II. The environment ie habitats and wildlife

Many surveys have proven that people enjoy being in a place where there is wildlife. Even if they never see the shy species, the knowledge that they share the forest with animals and birds adds value to the visitor experience. Carron Valley Forest is home to many species and habitats more commonly associated with the Highlands, and raising awareness of this among visitors will increase the feeling of escape, and promote the idea that it is a special place. Species more typical of the wilder parts of Scotland, and present in Carron Valley Forest, include red deer, red squirrel, pine marten, black grouse, and most recently, a sighting of a wildcat.

Not always as shy or as hidden as you might think. We understand there have now been 2 sightings of Wildcat. NT watched an Eagle for at least 5 mins round the back of Meikle Bin just after the Ministerial visit on Wed 9th.

III. the atmosphere or 'sense of place' and how it is conserved, managed and interpreted

It is important that any developments and infrastructure are in keeping with the accepted Vision, and do not take away from the sense of escape to a Highland setting.

- 1) For many years vandalism, joyriding and dumping of cars was an issue in the forest. The resident FCS Ranger, coupled with tighter management of access points, has stopped this problem. The increase of bona fide users as the strategy takes effect will also discourage abuse. FCS is committed to maintaining a resident Ranger at Carron Valley.

CVDG agree and support these points

- 2) Ensure the visitor receives co-ordinated messages from the different partners in advance of the visit and while on site. Clanranald, as a business venture, is keen

3) All Partners should bear in mind the agreed Vision when designing marketing and interpretative material, and incorporate its ethos into their own thinking.

IV. infrastructure including signage and information, that helps the visitor have a safe and enjoyable experience, and is in keeping with the attributes above

[MW point refers again](#)

The standards that recreation facilities are expected to meet are rising all the time. All infrastructure on FCS land is expected to follow industry best practice for design, construction, and materials. The assumption is that all timber is FSC standard, that any trails are built to best practice guidelines, and that any buildings incorporate appropriate energy saving measures.

[CVDG have some good ideas on the energy saving / environmental front – we'll submit with the L+ info](#)

V. managing needs and expectations of different user groups to provide a safe enjoyable visit for all, and at the same time be sustainable and manageable by FCS, with support from partners as appropriate.

Develop, via the Concordat, effective partner communication & understanding, to add value to the Carron Valley visitor experience. The needs and aspirations of each type of user will be addressed within the context of those of other users, and subject to the management requirements relating to the wider forest.

VI. Optimising business opportunities to address needs and expectations of users, and develop the local economy

There may be scope for one or more local businesses to benefit from the recreational development in the Forest. This will be explored through the partnership, and acted on in accordance with corporate strategies.

[As previously indicated](#)

VII. the timescale for achieving the Vision most effectively

The Forest Design Plan is used to derive annual felling programmes. A map of the felling areas, or coupes, until 2016 is shown as **App 3**. Felling year may change by a year subject to timber markets, and the Forest Design Plan is reviewed every five years. This map can be used by the partnership for preparing annual programmes. Replanting of the ground normally takes place between one and three years after felling. The easiest time to build trails is during this fallow period, but this timing will not be appropriate in some cases. **App 1 and App 2** show the access improvements which meet the needs and aspirations of most of those who have contributed.

VIII Resources for Construction and Maintenance

Future support by FCS has to be considered in light of the fact that FCS budgets are flatlining or even reducing, for the three year period of this plan. Future costs to FCS must be considered as part of any project proposal, bearing in mind that maintenance is not merely cash input but staff time to manage corporate risk from public access. A GB visitor safety review on FC land is in progress and as a result, the input by FCS staff will increase.

There are ways to mitigate and support this and they are bound up in commercial opportunities, car parking etc. In fact we've had several posts on the subject of cash donations (i.e the principle of cash donations –not cheques in the post) to help maintain the trails on the CVDG forum. So, with the mtb public at least, there is a spirit having to contribute to 'pay to play.'

App 1: Map of proposals derived from consultation

App 2: Table of proposals showing timings and generic costings

App 3: Map showing areas to be felled and year, until 2016

Rena Tarwinska

FCS

June 06