

## Big Beinn Does The Talking

The peaks and pines of Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve in Wester Ross are the focus of a new accessible visitor centre and trails recently opened by Scottish Natural Heritage.

The new facilities consist of four Talking Trails under the banner: 'Let your mind do the walking, Beinn Eighe do the talking'. The concept was put together by John Finlay Associates to provide physical and intellectual access for visitors of all abilities. This proved attractive to sponsors, with funding coming from the Heritage Lottery Fund, European Union, Ross and Cromarty Enterprise and SNH.

Beinn Eighe is Britain's oldest National Nature Reserve and embraces the largest of our western native pinewoods. The woods are known as 'temperate rainforest' thanks to the area's high rainfall, and the damp conditions sustain a rich assortment of mosses and liverworts. The reserve is also known for its dragonflies and its typical West Highland species including deer, eagle and pine marten.

30,000 visitors explore this great swathe of remote and rugged ground each year, with its mix of ancient pinewoods and dramatic mountains. Many walk the reserve's spectacular Woodland and Mountain Trails. However, for many these trails are too long and strenuous, and SNH wanted to construct new, shorter walks on lower ground.

The Talking Trails project provided an effective solution, allowing the many people who had hitherto felt excluded to discover what makes Beinn Eighe special.

The exhibition interpretation includes computer touch screen games, hands-on models and audio-visual presentation, while the outdoor trails feature tree tales, playful poetry and striking wood and rock art, as well as great scenic views.

Each of the trails offers a different interpretive approach:

### Outside-In Trail

The visitor centre exhibition is laid out as an indoor trail using varying floor levels and surfaces. Featuring a series of twists and turns, and a wide variety of graphic, three-dimensional and interactive displays, the exhibits aim to involve visitors in their 'journey'. Textual styles are mixed in order to accommodate the varied intellectual needs and capacities of visitors.

### Picnic Trail

A question and answer game sets out to link human picnics with the food that the creatures of the NNR eat. The questions appear on the visitor centre wall in the form of circular, plate-like panels, with the answers mounted on posts alongside the trail.

## Rhyming Trail

The trail panels feature a variety of provocative and humorous riddles. This light-hearted but informative approach aims to help visitors discover more about the wildlife and natural processes of the woodland. Each riddle has an associated panel a short distance away, which provides the answer along with some woodland interpretation.

## Ridge Trail

Visitors are encouraged to explore the lower slopes of Beinn Eighe, appreciate the forces that created the landscape and discover a bit about what SNH is doing to protect and enhance the reserve. It introduces a more contemplative style, with excerpts of Gaelic poetry (English translations alongside), supported by brief commentaries on key topics.

SNH brought in expertise on all abilities access through the Fieldfare Trust and the Joint Mobility Unit to ensure the development was as accessible as possible for disabled people. Fieldfare also organised local consultation with disabled representatives from DASH (Disability Action Scottish Highlands) and the Skye and Lochalsh Disability Access Group. Both gave useful comments on changes that would help them - and people with other disabilities - get the most from the site, and were interested in re-visiting after completion to provide further feedback.

This integrated all-abilities Visitor Centre and associated trails is a first for the West Highlands. SNH sees it as a significant advance in its bid to provide people with greater opportunities to take pride in their natural heritage and offer them enhanced facilities to understand and enjoy it to the full.

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