

# **Dunnet Forestry Trust: Dunnet Forest Draft Recreation Management Plan Consultation Paper**

## **Introduction**

Dunnet Forest, on the north Caithness coast, is managed by Dunnet Forestry Trust, a company limited by guarantee with community membership, under a long-term management agreement with the owners, Scottish Natural Heritage. DFT's management of the forest is based on a Management Plan drawn up in 2001 after extensive local consultation, which set out in broad terms the aims and objectives of future management, and identified two key issues for more detailed planning and work once the community assumed control. These were restructuring (felling and replanting) to ensure the long-term survival of the forest, and provision of recreation to meet and balance the aspirations of all potential user groups.

Restructuring work has already commenced in the forest, and the Trust has begun the process of writing a Recreation Management Plan to address the second key issue. The purpose of this consultation paper is to present a Draft Plan and gather the views of members and other stakeholders. The Final Plan will set out how the Trust will maintain and enhance the recreational and amenity value of the forest over the next five years, and in particular describe:

- how and where facilities such as paths, car-parks etc are to be established and maintained
- how recreation management will be integrated with other aspects of woodland management
- how legal constraints and safety issues will affect recreational provision.

The final plan will also address how best to publicise the recreational use of the forest.

The Draft Plan has been drawn up by the Board of Directors and the Community Forest Manager. In so doing, we have taken into account a number of legal and contractual constraints, which may limit our decision-making, and are briefly discussed in the next section of text, along with the rationale behind our decision to informally zone the forest for different types of use and provision.

The Draft Plan is presented in tabular form, with explanatory text, and with proposed works shown on the accompanying map. For many elements – e.g. new paths – we have made specific proposals, for some others – e.g. benches, litter bins – we have left the matter open and will be guided by your comments. Finally, we have included our draft proposals for guidance on responsible use.

Throughout the paper we ask a number of questions about particular elements of the Draft Plan: these questions are gathered on a "response sheet" (at the end of the document) for you to fill in and return. Please feel free to continue on separate sheets if required, and to comment on any aspects of recreational provision. It would be very helpful if your comments could be as geographically specific as possible, identifying compartments where you feel a particular item should or should not be sited. We are keen to receive as many responses as possible: even if you agree with the Draft Plan in its entirety – please let us know!

This paper is being circulated to the membership of Dunnet Forestry Trust, and local representatives of other user-groups and stakeholders. It is also available for download from the Trust's website ([www.dunnetforest.org](http://www.dunnetforest.org)) . Please send your comments (by August 31 2004) to: Dunnet Forestry Trust, Harland, Castletown, Caithness KW14 8UD, or by email to: [info@dunnetforest.org](mailto:info@dunnetforest.org) .

## **Limitations to Action**

### **Environmental Designation**

Dunnet Forest is part of the Dunnet Links SSSI: maintenance and enhancement of the conservation interest of the site is both a key objective of DFT and part of the terms of the lease from our landlords, Scottish Natural Heritage. All practical operations require SNH approval, and we are of course keen to ensure that works do not have adverse environmental effects.

### **Health and Safety/Insurance**

Dunnet Forestry Trust has a legal duty of care to take reasonable steps to ensure public safety in the forest, and the Trust carries public liability insurance for the forest as a condition of our lease. Managing public safety in woodlands is by no means simple: trees and woods are dynamic (sometimes more than we would like), and absolute safety can never be guaranteed: there will always be potential for trip hazards and falling branches. The Trust will take all reasonable precautions to minimise risks to users of the forest: in general, the intensity of safety management will be related to the type and intensity of public usage.

### **Land Reform**

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 contains provisions for new statutory rights of access to the outdoors. These rights cover non-motorised activities on land and inland water, and are expected to come into force in late 2004. Official advice and guidance on users' and land-managers' rights and responsibilities is to be published in the "Scottish Outdoor Access Code". Once the Act comes into force, land-managers will not be able to unreasonably deny access to non-motorised users (pedestrians, cyclists, horse-riders and canoeists), who in turn have a duty to exercise their access rights responsibly.

Unfortunately, the draft version of the code available at time of writing does not define "responsible usage", which of course varies considerably according to the context of the land – farmland, mountain, woodland, etc. Use of the forest by cyclists and horses raises issues of potential damage to paths, boardwalks, etc, and the possibility of conflict with other users. To minimise such eventualities, we propose to draw up, in conjunction with representatives of specific user groups, an informal code of conduct, which will give general guidance as to what is and is not "responsible" exercise of access rights within Dunnet Forest.

### **Forest Management & Restructuring**

As noted previously, DFT has a commitment to restructure the forest to ensure its long-term stability and value as a recreational resource. The overall effect of restructuring will be to greatly increase the proportion and diversity of broadleaves, particularly at the expense of lodgepole and mountain pine, and to create a varied age structure of stands through the forest.

The first, and most extensive, phase of clear-felling windblown and high-risk stands is now complete, with two much smaller areas scheduled for felling in 2005 & 2006. These felled areas will be replanted in due course; our restocking plans incorporate significant areas of open ground to accommodate paths. The future forestry work programme includes a number of operations which will improve the amenity value of the forest: thinning and brashing (removing lower branches) some of the denser stands, creating a series of glades within some of the mountain pine areas, and planting a wide range of broadleaf trees in sparsely stocked areas.

Inevitably, safety considerations demand path closures during forest operations, DFT undertake to inform users well in advance, and keep the extent and duration of closures to a minimum.

### **Finance**

Financial considerations are, inescapably, a constraint on operations, however, we feel that they should not be a constraint on aspirations. The works contained in this draft have been informally costed, and we anticipate that the majority can and will be financed from two sources:

- Scottish Natural Heritage, through the monies already committed under DFT's SSSI Management Agreement
- Forestry Commission Scotland, through the Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme. An application will be made once this Plan has been agreed and approved.

If necessary we will seek additional funding for projects which lie outside the scope of the Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme and/or were not contained in the Dunnet Forest Management Plan.

## Zoning

The key challenge for DFT in providing and managing recreation in the forest is the need to cater for a wide range of users and user-groups, and to integrate recreation provision with a number of other forest management objectives and constraints. Taking all the factors discussed previously, and drawing from comments made during the public consultation for the Dunnet Forest Management Plan drawn up in 2001, we believe that the best way forward is through informally zoning the forest. We emphasise that the three zones described below are not rigid demarcations on the lines of "you can do this here but not here", but are intended to guide our thinking and planning as to which areas are best suited for particular types of provision and management.

Family Zone (roughly corresponding to Compartments 6, 7 & 8).

This zone, close to the main car-park, presently sees the most intensive recreational use, and we expect that this will continue. The emphasis will remain on family and all-abilities access, with paths constructed to an appropriate standard, and, particularly in Compartment 6, continued maintenance and investment in "forest furniture" – picnic tables, benches, interpretation. Given the standard of path work, and the high pedestrian/family usage, this zone is not suitable for horse-riding and "sport" cycling, and DFT will discourage such usage.

Active Zone (roughly corresponding to Compartments 1,2,3 & 4).

This zone, which includes much of the northern part of the forest, will see the bulk of restructuring work – clearfelling, thinning and replanting over the next few years. These operations provide an opportunity to redesign compartments, and the Draft Plan contains considerable new provision in this zone for walkers and runners, and also for new user groups: horse riders and sport cyclists.

Quiet Zone (roughly corresponding to Compartments 5, 9 & 10).

This zone, at the eastern end of the forest, presently has a very limited path network, with such paths as exist confined to the compartment boundaries. Significant areas of compartments 5 & 9 were deeply ploughed and planted with Mountain Pine, and have become almost impenetrable, whilst initial plantings of much of compartment 10 failed, leaving a large area of open space habitats. Restructuring operations in this zone will be confined to a gradual programme of felling small glades in the mountain pine areas, and replanting with broadleaves. We will remove derelict stock fences around the forest perimeter, but will not create new paths through compartments.

Zoning	
Q1	Do you agree with the proposed informal zoning of the forest? Do you feel that it is an appropriate way of balancing the interests of the various users of the forest, whilst meeting the Trusts' legal and contractual imperatives?

## The Draft Plan

The table below contains the specific operations which make up the draft plan, showing proposed quantities and an approximate timetable for implementation. Some elements of the timetable are fixed – obviously we can't reinstate paths across clearfells before we carry out felling – others may be amended if the works are felt to be priority.

Certain works (marked \*) have already been approved, and in some cases are underway already.

What?	Where?	How Much?	When?
Repair & Extend Car Park*	Cmpt 6	1	Jun 2004
New path – northern perimeter	Cmpts 1 & 2	900m	2005
New path - internal	Cmpt 1	450m	2007
New path – north eastern perimeter	Cmpt 5	400m	2007
New path – all abilities	Cmpts 2 & 7	600m	2006
Reinstate paths after clearfell	Cmpts 1, 3 & 4	1600m	2005/6
Reinstate paths after clearfell	Cmpt 8	500m	2006/7
Reinstate paths after clearfell	Cmpt 7	700m	2007
Improve existing paths	Cmpt 8	150m	2005
Upgrade bridges for ATV access*	Various	As required	
On-going path & structure maintenance*	All	As required	
Felling dead trees by main paths*	Cmpts 6, 7 & 8	As required	
New waymarking	To be decided		
Specialist path – horse trail	Cmpts 1, 2, 3 & 4	1500m	Late 2005
Specialist path – technical MTB trail	Cmpts 2 & 3	500m	Mid 2005
Remove derelict fencing - southern	Cmpts 6, 7, 8 & 9	900m	2005
Remove derelict fencing – eastern	Cmpts 5 & 10	700m	2007
Forest furniture – picnic tables	Cmpts 6 & 7 (?)	?	?
Forest furniture – simple benches	To be decided		
Interpretation – main entrance*	Cmpt 6	1	Aug 2004
Notice board – works entrance	Cmpt 6	1	2005
Permanent Orienteering course	All	1	2005
Upgrade hide	Cmpt 2	1	2006
Weather shelter	To be decided		
Sculpture trail	Cmpt 6	?	?
Other items: litter bins, signage, etc	To be decided		

### The Map

Most of the items listed above (exceptions are new waymarking, picnic tables, benches, weather shelter, sculpture trail and "other items") are shown on the attached map, which also has an inset showing the informal zoning of the forest. The map divides the forest into 10 compartments, based on the original rectangular grid laid out at the time of planting – it would be very helpful if responses and comments could refer to compartment numbers wherever possible.

### New Paths:

There are three main categories of new paths proposed (and shown on the map):

- re-instatement and in some cases re-routing of existing paths after clearfell operations – taking the opportunity to lay out an extended path network in the restocking areas, and to depart from the original “grid” network of rides. These paths will generally be unsurfaced, although bridges will be upgraded if necessary to allow quad bike access for management.
- creation of new paths – most notably in the “active zone”, around the northern perimeter of the forest, where as above paths will generally be unsurfaced, and by an extension to the surfaced all-abilities path running through compartments 2 & 7.
- specialist routes for new user groups – a new horse-riding trail through the recently clearfelled area (Compartments 1 – 4), using the main timber extraction route, which is to be levelled and surfaced with woodchip, and a “technical” (which in layman’s terms means “difficult”, not “fast”) mountain bike route through compartments 2 & 3.

We emphasise that, in general, creation of the proposed paths will NOT require cutting live trees.

New Paths	
Q2	Do you agree with the proposed paths described above and shown on the map? Are there any additional areas where you would like to see paths created, or any paths proposed which you feel should not be made?

### Existing Paths:

We will improve drainage/surfacing where required, notably at 2 locations in compartment 8. We will remove derelict stock fencing on the southern boundary of compartments 6, 7, 8 & 9, to improve safety and visual amenity. We will continue to maintain and improve other paths, boardwalks and bridges as required, and propose to set up a reporting system, by which regular users undertake to check and report problems (e.g. windblown trees across the paths, or broken planks on boardwalks & bridges) to the forester.

Existing Paths	
Q3	Do you have any particular concerns about the existing path network? Would you be prepared to be one of our informal path checkers?

### Way-marking:

The forest has one way-marked path of about 1000m, contained entirely within compartment 6 and largely using the surfaced path. DFT has a further 30 way-marker posts kindly provided by the Highland Access Project, which are in storage pending agreement on their siting. We have not made specific proposals on this issue, and welcome your views on both the extent of way-marking and specific routes which might be marked.

Way-marking	
Q4	Should we confine way-marked footpaths to the “family zone”, <b>or</b> provide waymarked pedestrian routes throughout the forest? Are there any routes (e.g. perimeter path) you think should be way-marked?

### Forest Furniture:

We propose to install additional picnic tables, benches, etc, in the “family zone”, chiefly close to the car park and all-abilities trail, with provision of simple benches elsewhere in the forest, but have not settled on how many, or at precisely which locations, and welcome your views on the matter. We also propose to install a small notice/welcome board at the north-western access to the forest.

Forest Furniture	
Q5	Do you agree that picnic tables etc should be confined to the "family zone", with simple benches elsewhere? Are there any sites where you would particularly like to see (or not like to see) such facilities?

**New Features and Structures:**

We have received a number of other proposals relating to the development of the recreational use of the forest. Our proposed plan incorporates the following four projects:

- Permanent Orienteering Course. This would entail mapping the forest to orienteering conventions and standards (it would be very useful for forest management to have an accurate map!) and the siting of c. 20 numbered wooden posts (c. 1m high) at mapped locations around the forest. Maps would be available from local outlets, e.g. Ranger Station, Tourist information, DFT office, and might suggest three possible courses; e.g. the easiest visiting 6 of the posts in the family zone, the hardest visiting all 20. The base map would also be available to devise courses for schools and youth groups events. The Orienteering course would NOT require the provision of any new paths.
- Sculpture Trail – installing various wood (and possibly stone) carvings alongside the all-abilities trail. This could be a one-off, themed, project, or an ad-hoc, on-going collection.
- Upgrading facilities at the hide – lining the interior and generally making it more comfortable.
- Building a simple weather shelter with roundwood poles from the forest, to be sited somewhere in the eastern half of the forest.

New Features and Structures:	
Q6	Do you agree with some or all of the proposed new features listed above? Do you have any particular preferences for the siting of a weather shelter? Do you wish to suggest any other recreationally-based projects or facilities?

**Other Items:**

The Draft Plan does not include specific proposals for other items such as litter bins, additional signage and interpretation, and we welcome your views as to whether such installations would be appropriate. Two specific ideas which have been considered, but are not included in the plan are:

- Re-creation of a hut circle: we feel that this idea, which has a lot of merit, and potentially could greatly enhance interest in the forest, is too complex to be included here, and would be best pursued as a separate project if there is sufficient support.
- Creation of tree-houses/tree-top walks: sadly, we feel that Health & Safety & Public Liability Insurance concerns make this inadvisable.

Other Items:	
Q7	Should we install litter bins and/or additional interpretation boards? If so, where? Would you support a project to recreate a hut-circle?

Additional comments:	
Q8	Do you have any other comments or suggestions for recreation in the forest? Do you have an opinion on how and where we should publicise the recreational facilities available in the forest?

## Guidance on responsible use

The following are proposed components of a code of guidance on responsible use of the forest.

### Horse-riders

- ❖ Access for horses should only be via the north-west entrance (the “works” access). Horse boxes should be parked at the public car park by the Ranger Station.
- ❖ Equestrian access should in general be restricted to the dedicated horse-riding track, and in no circumstances should horses use the all-abilities trail or wooden boardwalks.
- ❖ Horses should be kept under control at all times, and not ridden at high speed. The horse trail and other paths are not suitable for galloping.

### Cyclists (MTB trail users)

- ❖ When travelling to and from the dedicated technical mountain bike trail, MTB riders should use the north-western access to the forest (parking in the ranger station car-park), and keep to the main east-west ride and the other wide rides.

### Cyclists (all)

- ❖ All cyclists should travel at a moderate speed, and be prepared to give way pedestrians and other users when crossing or travelling on multi-user paths, dismounting if necessary.

### Dog-walkers

- ❖ Dog walkers should keep their animals under control at all times, and be aware of the potential to alarm other users.
- ❖ During the lambing season, dogs should be kept on a leash when using perimeter paths adjacent to farmland when livestock are present.
- ❖ Dog walkers are reminded that it is an offence under the Dog Fouling (Scotland) Act 2003 to allow your dog to foul in a public place and not clean up after it.

### All users

- ❖ Please respect other users’ rights to peaceful enjoyment of the forest, take care not to damage the natural environment, do not start fires, and take your litter home with you.

Guidance on responsible use:	
Q9	Do you agree with the suggested guidance on responsible use? Given the imperatives of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, is there any additional guidance you would like to propose?

## Acknowledgements:

Dunnet Forestry Trust have received financial assistance with the preparation of the Recreation Management Plan (including this consultation document) from Forestry Commission Scotland through the Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme.

We are grateful for on-going advice and assistance on aspects of the preparation of the plan from David Mackay and David Shaw, Scottish Natural Heritage, David Barclay, Highland Access Project, Willie Beattie, Forestry Commission Scotland, and Mary Legg, Highland Council Ranger Service.

The work of Dunnet Forestry Trust is supported by Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland, The Forestry and Rural Development Scheme, The Scottish Land Fund, Highlands and Island Enterprise Community Land Unit, Highland Council, Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise and the Community Economic Development Programme.

**Response Sheet** Please feel free to continue overleaf or on separate sheets if desired.

1	Do you agree with the proposed informal zoning of the forest? Do you feel that it is an appropriate way of balancing the interests of the various users of the forest, whilst meeting the Trusts' legal and contractual imperatives?	
2	Do you agree with the proposed paths described above and shown on the map? Are there any additional areas where you would like to see paths created, or any paths proposed which you feel should not be made?	
3	Do you have any particular concerns about the existing path network? Would you be prepared to be one of our informal path checkers?	
4	Should we confine way-marked footpaths to the "family zone", <b>or</b> provide waymarked pedestrian routes throughout the forest? Are there any routes (e.g. perimeter path) you think should be way-marked?	
5	Do you agree that picnic tables etc should be confined to the "family zone", with simple benches elsewhere? Are there any sites where you would particularly like to see (or not like to see) such facilities?	
6	Do you agree with some or all of the proposed new features listed above? Do you have any particular preferences for the siting of a weather shelter? Do you wish to suggest any other recreationally-based projects or facilities?	
7	Should we install litter bins and/or additional interpretation boards? If so, where? Would you support a project to recreate a hut-circle?	
8	Do you have any other comments or suggestions for recreation in the forest? Do you have an opinion on how and where we should publicise the recreational facilities available in the forest?	
9	Do you agree with the proposed guidance on responsible use? Given the requirements of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, is there any additional guidance you would like to propose?	