

**Dunnet Forestry Trust:
Dunnet Forest Recreation Management Plan
Jan 2005 – Mar 2008**

Contents

Introduction

Plan preparation & public consultation

The Context of the Plan

Environmental designation

Health and safety/insurance

Integration of recreation with woodland management

Land reform & access rights

Guidance on responsible use

Zoning

Car parking and access

Publicising the forest and facilities available

The Content of the Plan

New paths

Existing paths and waymarking

Other public access features

Public safety & environmental improvement

Timetable of Planned Actions

Costs & funding

Map

Acknowledgements

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 (SNH). 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:

- To safeguard the long term future of the forest through silvicultural intervention: felling lodgepole pine stands of highest windthrow risk and restocking with a mixture of conifers and broadleaves, with more wind-firm stands to be carefully thinned.
- To enhance the conservation interest of the forest, and enhance the structural diversity of the forest: protecting remnants of the links vegetation, creating glades and graded edges to woodland blocks, and small scale enrichment planting of broadleaves to maximise the diversity of the forest.
- To maintain and enhance the recreation and amenity value of the forest: developing new provision, maintaining features funded under the Objective 1 project, developing educational usage, and zoning the forest to cater for all interested user groups.

This Plan addresses the third of these broad objectives, setting out how the Trust intend to maintain and enhance the recreational and amenity value of the forest, and explaining the context and rationale for our planned actions

Section 1 lays out the context of the plan, explaining how legal constraints and safety issues affect recreational provision, how recreation management will be integrated with other aspects of woodland management, and how it is intended to publicise the recreational use of the forest. It also includes guidance on responsible use for a variety of user groups, and explains the basis of the informal zoning of the forest.

Section 2 contains the practical actions we will undertake to maintain and enhance recreation in the forest, which specifications where appropriate. These actions are collated in a table, showing the proposed timetable for works, and whether they are eligible for funding through the Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme (SFGS). All practical works listed are scheduled for completion by March 2008, bringing recreation management into step with our general forest management plan, which is scheduled for review from that date.

Plan preparation & public consultation

The preparation of this Plan included extensive public consultation. A draft plan was circulated to the membership of Dunnet Forestry Trust and local representatives of other user-groups and stakeholders, and was available for download from the Trust's website (www.dunnetforest.org). The draft plan was also displayed at the Caithness County Show, and the Dunnet Forest Open Day. The draft plan, and a summary of the responses received, are also available from the DFT website.

We were very encouraged by the number of responses to the consultation, the great majority of which were supportive of the proposed works. Important issues were raised, such as provision for access to the forest by horses, and cyclists, and arrangements for parking of horse boxes, and there was a range of opinions on several other points: e.g. waymarking, and the provision of litter bins and dog bins. All comments received have been considered in preparing the final plan as presented here.

The Context of the Plan

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 DFT 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 in a specific area of the forest will be related to the type and intensity of public usage in that area.

Integration of recreation with woodland management

As previously noted, 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. Additionally, to support continued management of the forest, DFT requires to earn income, e.g. from sales of firewood, timber, nursery plants, and christmas trees. Inevitably, forest operations will affect recreation provision, with, e.g. safety considerations demanding path closures during tree felling. To minimise these affects, DFT undertake to:

- Follow good practice, as set out in industry-approved guidance, in the management of work sites where people are taking access.
- Keep the area affected, and the duration and type of any precaution, to the minimum required.
- Tell people about these at the main access points and, if possible, provide alternative routes.
- If possible, concentrate felling and extraction at times when public use is likely to be lowest.
- Allow people to use particular routes when work has ended (such as for the weekend) and would not cause significant safety hazards.
- Ensure that all site operators and vehicle drivers are aware that people might be present.

Land Reform & access rights

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 sometime in 2005. 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. Official advice and guidance on users' and land-managers' rights and responsibilities is published in the "Scottish Outdoor Access Code", copies of which are available from SNH, or can be downloaded from www.outdooraccess-scotland.com

The code is based on 3 key principles:

- Respect the interests of other people
- Care for the environment
- Take responsibility for your own actions

Section 5 of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, entitled "A practical guide to access rights and responsibilities" indicates how these responsibilities apply to more common situations encountered in the outdoors. Relevant extracts are reproduced below in the "Guidance on Responsible Use", together with supplementary, site-specific guidance drawn up by DFT.

Guidance on responsible use

This section contains relevant extracts from the Scottish Outdoor Access Code's "A practical guide to access rights and responsibilities", together with supplementary, site-specific guidance on what constitutes "responsible use" from Dunnet Forestry Trust.

Forests and woods

SOAC: "You can exercise access rights in forests and woods. If you are cycling or horse riding, keeping to suitable paths and tracks can help minimise any damage. If you have a dog with you, keep it under close control or on a short lead during the spring (April to July) so that breeding birds are not disturbed. Be careful not to trample young trees."

DFT: "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."

Forests and woods with on-going forest operations

SOAC: "Tree felling, timber extraction and haulage may affect an area of forest and forest roads for several months. Read any signs warning you of forest operations, such as tree felling and extraction, and follow any precautions taken by the land manager. This will ensure that you do not hinder these operations, and ensure your safety and that of people working there. In some cases, signs may indicate that it is safe to go along a route if the activity has stopped, such as for the weekend. If you come across machinery, keep a safe distance. Do not climb on to timber stacks and keep children away from them."

Cycling

SOAC: "Access rights extend to cycling. Cycling on hard surfaces, such as wide paths and track, causes few problems. On narrow routes, cycling may cause problems for other people, such as walkers and horse riders. If this occurs, dismount and walk until the path becomes suitable again. Do not endanger walkers and horse riders: give other users advance warning of your presence and give way to them on a narrow path. If you are cycling off-path, particularly in winter, avoid going onto wet, boggy or soft ground, and churning up the surface."

DFT: "Cyclists should take special care on paths leading from the main car-park, which are narrow and heavily used. It would be preferable for adult groups of "sport" cyclists heading for the specialist MTB trail to park at the Ranger Station and access the forest via the 'works' access."

Dogs

SOAC: "Access rights apply to people walking dogs provided that their dog(s) is kept under proper control. In recreation areas avoid causing concern to others by keeping your dog under close control or on a short lead, and pick up and remove your dog's faeces if it defecates in a public open place."

DFT: "Dogs should be kept on a short lead when using perimeter paths when livestock are present in adjacent fields, particularly during the lambing season. 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."

Horse riding

SOAC: "Access rights extend to horse riding. Riding on firm or hard surfaces, such as wide paths and tracks and well-drained ground, causes few problems. On narrow routes, horse riding may cause problems for other people, such as walkers and cyclists. If this occurs, take extra care by giving way to walkers where possible or by looking for an alternative route. If you are riding off-path, particularly in winter, avoid going onto wet, boggy or soft ground, and churning up the surface."

DFT: "Paths leading from the main car-park are not suitable for horses, and equestrian access should only be via the north-west entrance (the "works" access). Horse boxes can 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 or cantering."

Wild camping & lighting fires

SOAC: "Access rights extend to wild camping. This type of camping is lightweight, done in small numbers and only for two or three nights in one place. Leave no trace by taking away all your litter, removing all trace of your tent pitch and not causing any pollution. Never light an open fire in areas such as forests and woods."

Zoning

A 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 other forest management objectives and constraints. To guide our thinking and planning, we have informally divided the forest into three zones. We emphasise that the zones described below are not rigid demarcations on the lines of “you can do this here but not here”, but are intended to indicate 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. Restructuring work is scheduled for parts of compartments 7 & 8, and will be swiftly followed by path reinstatement. Given the nature of paths in this zone, 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 paths generally confined to 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.

Car parking and access

There are two access points to Dunnet Forest, the “car-park” at the south-western corner of the forest (grid ref: ND220698), and the “works access” approx. 400m north (grid ref ND 220702)

Works carried out during 2004 increased the capacity of the car-park to c. 20 cars, and we anticipate that this will continue to be the main public entrance to the forest. However, the paths leading from this car park are unsuitable for horses, and equestrian access to the forest will only be available via the works access.

For security and operational reasons it is not possible to open the works access for public parking; parking for horse boxes is available at the large car park adjacent to the Ranger Station approximately 250m north. We recognise that this is not ideal, but note that the Thurso-Castletown-Dunnet Access Development Plan commissioned during 2004 identified provision of a safe off-road route from this car park to the forest as being of the highest priority.

Dunnet Forestry Trust strongly support this proposal – in addition to improving safety for equestrian users, this route would provide safe access for pedestrians and cyclists from Dunnet village to the forest.

Publicising the forest and facilities available

Dunnet Forestry Trust will publicise the forest and the enhanced facilities available by a range of methods:

- Producing an updated leaflet promoting the forest and its facilities.
- On the Internet, through the trust’s website, and other appropriate sites, e.g. Caithness.org
- Through continuing involvement of schools and youth groups in activities in the forest
- By holding regular Open days, and by attendance at other functions, e.g. County Show
- Through our partnerships with statutory bodies and NGOs, e.g. SNH, North Highland Forest Trust, Community Woodland Association

Recreation facilities grant aided through SFGS will bear the “Walkers Welcome” logo, and will appear on the FCS website.

The Content of the Plan

This section contains descriptions and specifications for the practical actions and works the Trust will undertake to maintain and enhance recreational provision in the forest. The actions are collated in the timetable below, and most are shown on the accompanying map.

New paths

Actions P1 – P4: Creation of new paths

A total of 2600m of new paths will be created, mostly in the “active zone”, around the northern perimeter of the forest. These will be simple lightweight paths made by removing debris, brashing trees, and using material won in cutting the path to fill hollows, with burn and ditch crossings as necessary.

Actions P5 – P9: Re-establishment, and in some cases re-routing of existing paths after clearfell operations

We will take the opportunity to lay out an extended path network in the restocking areas, and to depart from the original “grid” network of rides to create a total of 2300m of new paths. These paths will generally as specified above, although bridges will be upgraded if necessary to allow quad bike access for management.

Actions SP1 – SP3: Extending the all-abilities path, and providing specialist routes for new user groups

A 600m extension to the all-abilities trail, surfaced with stone, will be created, providing an extra loop from the northern eastern corner of the existing trail, running through compartments 2 and 7.

A new horse-riding trail (1500m) will be created through the recently clear-felled area (Compartments 1 – 4), using the main timber extraction route, which will be levelled and surfaced with wood-chip.

A “technical” (which in layman’s terms means “difficult”, not “fast”) mountain bike route (c. 500m) will be constructed through compartments 2 & 3.

Existing paths & waymarking

Action EPI: Drainage and surfacing

We will improve drainage/surfacing where required, notably at 2 locations in compartment 8.

Actions EP2 – EP3: Derelict fencing

We will remove derelict stock fencing on the southern (570m) and eastern (300m) boundaries of the forest, to improve safety and visual amenity.

Action EP4: Ongoing maintenance

We will continue to maintain and improve other paths, boardwalks and bridges as required, and will 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.

Actions W1 – W3: Waymarking

Two pedestrian routes and the horse trail will be waymarked, using posts kindly provided by the Highland Council Access Project: The first pedestrian route (1.5km) will follow the all-abilities trail, the second route (2.5km) will include new paths through the family zone after post-clearfell reinstatement

Existing waymarker posts will be removed.

Other public access features

Action IB1: Interpretation board at main entrance

A formal interpretation board will be installed on the stone plinth at the main entrance to the forest. The board will be dual purpose, with a printed laminated sheet approx A1 size on one side, and a notice board on the reverse. (Funding for this board has already been agreed by Forestry Commission Scotland)

Action IB2: Notice board at works access

A small notice board will be installed at the works access

Actions O1 – O2: Permanent orienteering course & map

The forest will be mapped to orienteering standards - a local member of the Inverness Orienteering Club has undertaken to revise the current basic map drawn by the forester – and a permanent orienteering course established, by the siting of c. 20 numbered wooden posts (c. 1m high) at mapped locations around the forest. The printed map, which will also contain general information about the forest, will suggest three possible courses; e.g. the easiest visiting

6 of the posts in the family zone, the hardest visiting all 20, and will be available from local outlets, e.g. Ranger Station, Tourist information, DFT office. Copies of the base map would also be available for schools and youth groups, etc, to devise courses for their own events.

Actions TB1 – TB2: Picnic table & benches

One new picnic table will be installed alongside the extension to the all-abilities trail
Three simple benches will also be installed.

Action BH1: Bird hide

Facilities at the bird hide (compartment 2) will be upgraded– lining the interior and making it more comfortable.

Action WSI: Weather shelter

A simple weather shelter will be constructed using roundwood poles from the forest, to be sited somewhere in the eastern half of the forest.

Action ST1: Sculpture Trail

The two wooden sculptures obtained to date by the Trust will be installed alongside the all-abilities trail. Further items obtained on an ad-hoc basis will be installed.

Public safety & environmental improvement

Action PS1: Safety Felling

DFT will carry out a programme of felling dead and dangerous trees in the family zone, particularly compartment 6.

Action PS2: Safety Inspection

DFT will carry out a formal safety inspection of the forest every 6 months.

Actions FI – F2: Fire signs and beaters

Two formal fire warning signs will be installed at the entrances to the forest.
Additional fire beaters will be purchased and deployed.

Action E1: Litter/Dog waste bin

A dual purpose litter and dog-waste bin will be installed by Highland Council at the main car-park.

Action E2: Litter picking

DFT will carry out regular, monthly litter pick-ups.

Action LI: Leaflets

A simple 2-colour folded A4 leaflet will be produced, for distribution through local outlets (Ranger Service, Tourist Information, etc)

Timetable of Planned Actions

Code	Item: description	Cmpt	Length/ Number	When	SFGS?
P1	North western perimeter – unsurfaced	1,2,3	950m	2006	Yes
P2	North eastern perimeter – unsurfaced	5,10	1050m	2007	Yes
P3	New internal links cmpt 1 – unsurfaced	1	450m	2006	Yes
P4	New internal links cmpt 7 – unsurfaced	7	150m	2007	Yes
P5	New paths in 1 st clearfell area – unsurfaced	1,2	100m	2005	Yes
P6	New paths in 2 nd clearfell area – unsurfaced	3	300m	2006	Yes
P7	New paths in 3 rd clearfell area – unsurfaced	4	500m	2006	Yes
P8	New paths in 4 th clearfell area – unsurfaced	8	500m	2007	Yes
P9	New paths in 5 th clearfell area – unsurfaced	7	900m	2007	Yes
SP1	New all abilities path - surfaced	2,7	600m	2005	Yes
SP2	New path after clearfell (horse)	1,2,3,4	1500m	2005	Yes
SP3	Specialist mountain bike trail	2,3	500m	2005	No
EP1	Drainage and surfacing	8	100m	2006	No
EP2	Remove derelict stock fencing	10	300m	2007	No
EP3	Remove derelict stock fencing	6,7,8	570m	2006	No
EP4	On-going maintenance	As required	As required	As required	No
W1	Waymarking (short route)	6	1	2006	No
W2	Waymarking (medium route)	6,7,8	1	2007	No
W3	Waymarking (horse trail)	1,2,3,4	1	2006	No
IB1	Interpretation board (main entrance)	6	1	2005	No*
IB2	Notice board (works access)	6	1	2006	No
O1	Permanent orienteering course	all	1	2005	No
O2	Orienteering map	all	500	2005	No
TB1	Picnic table	7	1	2005	Yes
TB2	Benches	6,7,8	3	2006	Yes
BH1	Bird hide	2	1	2007	No
WS1	Weather shelter	?	1	2006	No
ST1	Sculpture trail	6	1	2005 on	No
E1	Litter/Dog waste bin	6	1	2005	No
E2	Litter picking	all	12 pa	2005/6/7	Yes
PS1	Safety felling	6,7,8	5 days pa	2005/6/7	Yes
PS2	Safety Inspection	All	2 pa	2005/6/7	Yes
F1	Fire signs	6		2005	No
F2	Fire beaters	As required		2005	No
LI	DFT Leaflets	all	1000	2006	Yes

Costs & funding

We estimate the total costs of these works to be c. £38,700. This does not include the cost of fire signs, which have already been purchased, or the laminated interpretation board for the main entrance, for which grant aid has already been approved.

An application to the Forestry Commission Scotland Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme has been drawn up in parallel to this plan, and will be submitted shortly. If approved, it will provide 90% funding of the costs of specific actions as noted above, the remaining 10% to be met from Dunnet Forestry Trust funds. Actions not funded by the FCS SFGS application will be funded by Scottish Natural Heritage, through the on-going SSSI Management Agreement.

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