

Bid to curb Ben Nevis ascents as charity climb 'destroys' peak

By Julia Horton

January 05 2009

It is the ultimate charity feat that draws thousands of people every year to some of the most spectacular scenery in Britain.

But the popularity of the Three Peaks Challenge is posing serious environmental concerns for those whose task it is to manage access to the highest summit involved.

Now moves are afoot to curb ascents of Ben Nevis amid fears that a growing army of fundraisers, and particularly their boots, are "destroying" the landscape.

More than 200,000 people are estimated to have climbed Ben Nevis last year, up from the record-breaking 169,300 who tackled the peak in 2007.

The numbers doing the so-called Three Peaks Challenge - where participants aim to climb the three highest hills in the countries of Scotland, Wales and England, Ben Nevis, Snowdon and Scafell Pike in 24 hours - are thought to be around 60,000.

That is twice the number officially booked in to do the beat-the-clock challenge, fuelling fears over erosion and litter left by groups who speed through the countryside to complete the event.

With numbers climbing the mountain growing, Highland Council, which runs the Glen Nevis Visitor Centre, is to hold talks this month with the Institute of Fundraising to draw up a new code of conduct striking a compromise between charity and conservation which it hopes will end "unsustainable" challenges on all three of Britain's highest peaks.

Jim Milligan, manager of the visitor centre, said: "We get groups of 20-year-old lads doing it as a challenge, it is not about charity really, it's about them running up and down the country. We're trying to get this word challenge' and the 24-hour side of these events dropped.

Call for organisations to 'take responsibility' for their fundraisers:-

"Things are improving, but we still have a serious issue with charity events and environmentally the situation is not sustainable. There is some serious erosion."

While larger parties book in advance of the challenge, giving the council a degree of control, smaller "gung-ho" groups just appear unannounced, which can turn the mountain into "Billy Smart's circus", Mr Milligan said.

He added that the council wants to work with charities, but said they had a duty to "take responsibility" for their fundraisers.

Conservationist body the John Muir Trust, which owns Ben Nevis, is also involved in the talks and hopes they will enable "all comers" to climb Britain's highest mountain without damaging it.

Andrew Campbell, the trust's head of land management, said: "We are concerned that the sheer number of participants in the Three Peaks Challenge is contributing to the erosion of alpine habitats within the Ben Nevis conservation area and adding to the already prevalent litter problem on the summit.

"Despite raising large amounts of money for good causes, the Three Peak Challenge seldom gives anything back to the local economy or for the upkeep of the local environment."

The trust also criticised environmental damage caused by participants driving around the country at speed, mainly in private vehicles.

The Fundraising Standards Board in Scotland (FSBS), the charities watchdog and sister body of the Institute of Fundraising, said its members already had to agree to follow strict principles on responsible outdoor fundraising.

But it acknowledged that the Three Peaks Challenge caused problems and existing regulation needed to be updated.

Currently, under the guidelines, groups are advised to limit the numbers of participants engaging in outside challenges in environmentally sensitive areas and to work closely with landowners and land managers about access.

FSBS manager Kate Higgins said: "There is a code of conduct in place but it does need to be modernised and improved. We are aware of the concerns and we think it is absolutely right that charities do need to take on board that they have to raise money in a way that is sustainable and is not to the detriment of other users of the mountains."

However, she warned that, while the FSBS supported the calls for charities to take greater responsibility, sponsored challenge events were a key way of engaging the public in fundraising and charities would not want to lose that source of income.