# Balancing beauty and tourism pressures on the North Coast 500



A personal account reflecting on the evolving experience of the North Coast 500 (NC500) route around Scotland’s Highlands highlights both the breathtaking scenery and the challenges brought by increasing tourism. Colin Farquhar, a creative spaces manager and film programmer, shared his memories in The Press and Journal (Aberdeen), illustrating the contrast between the natural beauty of the region and the impact of growing visitor numbers.

In August 2021, while travelling the NC500, Farquhar encountered a serious car accident near Thurso. Around 4pm, he came upon a scene where four cars had collided earlier that day. Although the occupants had been taken to hospital and survived, the aftermath was stark, with wreckage and debris strewn along a 100-yard stretch of road. “Not exactly my fondest memory of a holiday, but one that has stayed vividly with me,” he said, contrasting it with the route’s scenic allure.

Prior to this incident, Farquhar observed several manifestations of the pressures the NC500’s popularity places on the local environment and communities. Earlier that day, he noticed noisy young drivers at a campsite in Thurso, and a large motorhome struggling on the bends near Bettyhill. These encounters underscore the daily realities locals face in accommodating the increasing inflow of tourists.

Since its rise in popularity nearly a decade ago, the NC500 has seen notable changes. When Farquhar first completed the route in 2016, the beaches at Achmelvich and Clach Toll felt “remote, peaceful and beautiful,” and campsites were not overwhelmed except by midges. Yet, even then, bottlenecks such as traffic jams on the Bealach na Ba pass and crowded establishments like the Applecross Inn were evident.

Over the years, concerns have intensified. Reports of environmental degradation, including human waste issues, overflowing bins, and dangerous driving, have emerged. These issues raise questions about the sustainability of tourism on the route and how to best respect both the landscape and the local inhabitants. "It’s frustrating that of course the answer is quite obvious, but suffers from the eternal issue, lack of apparent funding," Farquhar noted.

He suggests that improvements in infrastructure are critical, pointing to the pressing need for additional toilets along the route. Greater engagement with communities spanning Sutherland, Caithness, Wester Ross, and Skye is also essential to ensuring balanced management. One potential solution is the introduction of a tourist levy or tolls for certain vehicles, such as motorhomes, which could generate income to invest back into the region's upkeep and services, a proposal that has garnered support from local voices.

Another advocated approach is encouraging ‘slow travel’ – inviting visitors to spend more time in each location rather than rushing through the route. Farquhar described his own slower exploration in 2021, after the accident, when he stayed in smaller towns like Tongue and ventured off the official route to discover less frequented and pristine beaches. This method not only benefits visitors by deepening their connection to the area but also disperses tourism pressure more evenly.

As the NC500 enters its tenth summer, discussions among locals and stakeholders continue about finding a sustainable balance between welcoming travellers and preserving the Highlands’ character. Farquhar’s reflections encapsulate the dual nature of the route: “Beautiful and boundless; wild, lost and loved.”

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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