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Rishi Sunak: Coast to Coast walk deserves national status

By **Rishi Sunak**

In 1973 the legendary fell walker Alf Wainwright set out from St Bees in Cumbria on a walk he called the Coast to Coast. Stretching 190 miles from the North Sea to the Irish Sea, his route took him through no less than three national parks: Cumbria's Lake District, my constituency's Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors. In the 40 years since, not a day has gone by when those footsteps have gone unfollowed.

With polls regularly naming the Coast to Coast walk as one of the world's greatest, I would venture to say that there is no better showcase of Britain's peerless natural beauty. We all know that our new Prime Minister is a great walker and, in yet another sign of her excellent judgment, on her visit to Germany last year she chose to present Chancellor Merkel with a copy of Alf Wainwright's Coast to Coast book. I understand that Chancellor Merkel is herself a keen hiker, so it is only a matter of time before Chancellor Merkel and the Prime Minister negotiate while strolling together on the Coast to Coast.

I would recommend that when they do, they take to heart Wainwright's very wise advice: "There is no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing."

With all the fame and prestige, it might seem self-evident that the Coast to Coast walk would be one of Britain's 15 official national trails. However, it is with regret that I report that this remarkable route is yet to be officially recognised and has not taken its rightful place alongside what are, in many cases, far less celebrated walks.

Despite its renown and the thousands who walk it every year, the Coast to Coast does not even appear on Ordnance Survey maps. That means that as popular as the walk is, attracting the visitors that it does, there is much less opportunity to promote it and attract even more visitors, which the rural economy needs.

More concerning still, its lack of official status means that none of the official funding provided to national trails such as the Pennine Way and Offa's Dyke is available to the Coast to Coast. That is why in April last year I met members of the Wainwright Society at Surrender bridge in Swaledale, to launch the Coast to Coast "Make it National" campaign.

Since that day, the campaign has garnered a coalition of formal support from no fewer than 53 local, district and county councils along the route, the national parks and, of course, members of the Wainwright Society, custodians of the legendary walker's legacy. The campaign has also attracted two celebrity backers, in the form of Julia Bradbury from Countryfile and Eric Robson, host of the BBC's Gardeners' Question Time.

Our campaign has three simple aims: first, to preserve one of our best-loved national treasures; secondly, to help more people discover this iconic walk; and lastly, to give a helping hand to the North's rural economy.

National trail status comes with a modest amount of public funding of about £100,000 a year. That may not be much in the budget of a country or even a county council, but for the Coast to Coast, that sum could make the difference between the slow erosion of rain, wind and bracken and an iconic walk that is preserved for the next generation.

The money could be used to signpost the route, keep bogs off the path and check the creeping advance of hawthorn, making the path easier for walkers to follow. To the credit of the local authorities, the route has been relatively well maintained and is mostly in great condition, but as the years go by, more and more issues arise that they do not have the resources to fix. The crossing point at the A19 dual carriageway at Ingleby Arncliffe is one example. At the end of a hard day's trek, carrying a heavy pack, walkers have to dodge traffic travelling up to 70mph to get across. With national trail status, we could make a strong case for a footbridge to be built.

At Nine Standards Rigg in Cumbria, the bog has become so bad that areas of the path have become virtually unwalkable.

That leads me to the second objective of our campaign, which is to help more people discover the Coast to Coast. National trail status would also be an enormous asset in promoting the Coast to Coast in the UK and abroad.

That brings me to the final objective of our campaign: supporting rural prosperity. The Coast to Coast is more than an institution that is close our hearts. It is one of the most vital arteries of our rural economy. Lining the path's 190 miles are not only spectacular views but hundreds of communities and businesses. Texas has oil, Australia has gold mines and North Yorkshire has its countryside.

VisitEngland estimates that those who go on walking holidays spend about £1bn annually. For businesses in our constituencies, that makes the iconic status of the Coast to Coast a vital source of custom.

The Coast to Coast route is part of the legacy of a unique man whose contribution to the natural world is unparalleled. Across mountains and fells, wandering through valleys and villages, it is an inspirational crossing of the north of England. In the words of Alf Wainwright himself: "Surely there cannot be a finer itinerary for a long-distance walk." It is time to recognise it as a national trail.