

Highland Environment Forum

20th September 2016 at Great Glen House, Inverness

Subject: Local Initiative, Landscape Action

Attendees:

Organisation	Name
Black Isle Partnership	Bill Taylor
Cairngorms National Park Authority	Andy Ford
CALL	Laura Traynor
Forest Commission Scotland	Giles Brockman
Highland Biological Recording Group	Ro Scott
Highland Council	Nicole Wallace
Highland Council	Robbie Bain
Highland Council	George Farlow
Highland Council climate change team	Heidi de Haas
Highland Environment Forum	Caroline Vawdrey
Home Energy Scotland	Bob Grant
Lochaber Environmental Group	Susan Carstairs
Lochaber Environmental Group	Andrew Squire
Lochside Associates	Janet Bromham
Marine Conservation Scotland	Catherine Gemmell
Moray Firth Partnership	Robyn Shilland
National Trust for Scotland (Wester Ross UNESCO)	Iain Turnbull
Nevis Partnership	Lizzie Cooper
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Scotland	Alison Searl
RSPB	Caroline Eccles
Scottish Environment Protection Agency	Alistair Duff
Scottish Natural Heritage	George Hogg (HEF Chair)
Scottish Wildlife Trust	Kenny Taylor
Scottish Wildlife Trust	Mark Foxwell
SCVO	Sandra Hogg
Sea Change	Sara Nason
SEPA	Jenny Davies
Signpost	Gail Duff
Skye & Lochalsh Environment Forum	James Merryweather
The Conservation Volunteers	Rob Thomas
Trees for Life	Steve Micklewright
University of the Highlands & Islands	Murray Stark
	Diana Gilbert

Apologies:

Cllr Audrey Sinclair
Rebecca Fretwell
Lorna Anness
Stephen Wiseman
Alison Craig
Rob dewar
Ian Wilson
Kenneth Knott
Jonathan Willet
Chief Inspector Colin Gough

Welcome and Introduction

George Hogg welcomed forum members to the September meeting, and to a programme designed to look at how environmental achievements can continue to be made in a challenging financial situation.

George highlighted some of the financial uncertainties that are now being faced, with all agencies having to undertake further budget cuts, and with uncertainty about any European funding post-Brexit. Currently financial commitments are only guaranteed for projects that have been agreed by the Autumn statement. Further, it is unknown what the priorities will be of the UK and Scottish governments.

At present SNH, in common with other public bodies, is scenario planning around significant further resource reductions over the next 1-3 years.

Opportunities for environmental activity may be provided as a result of the Community Empowerment Act, which should be in place by the end of the year. George referred to this in more detail in the introduction to the afternoon workshop.

Presentations

All presentations are hosted online on the Highland Environment Forum website.

1) South Skye Seas Initiative: James Merryweather

The South Skye Seas Initiative arose out of opposition to four proposed fish farms in the South Skye sea lochs, these have recently been turned down. In order to effectively oppose the fish farm proposals the group undertook research and community work, including shore walks, surveys, marine workshops and community briefing, and this approach is being continued under the new initiative, which is also seeking to secure marine conservation.

The South Skye Seas Initiative is now developing a project, with the aim of attracting funding to undertake conservation initiatives and to encourage and promote a more sustainable sea harvest such as mussel farming, seaweed farming, scallop diving/ranching and sustainable fishing.

In discussion after the talk the high levels of effluent from fish farms was raised, and it was noted that higher discharges received higher financial penalties (SEPA).

2) Wester Ross UNESCO Biosphere: Iain Turnbull

Iain noted that he was speaking on behalf of the interim committee, for whom he is currently the main point of contact.

Wester Ross achieved UNESCO biosphere status in April 2016, after 12 months community consultation to seek an enlargement of the UNESCO area beyond Beinn Eighe, following a UNESCO decision to remove smaller sites from the list.

The biosphere stretches from Coigach to Loch Hourn/ Glen Elg/ Arnisdale and east to Garve. A map is shown on the powerpoint pdf.

A biosphere is managed on a zone system:

- *core zone* - covers land with UK and EU natural heritage designations and is managed primarily for conservation. These are Beinn Eigh, Loch Maree island. Coille Mhor Oakwood.

- *buffer zone* - has an emphasis on conservation and is intended to buffer the core zone. The areas have a high level of biodiversity interest, should have conservation management plans in place. For this reason there are several areas not currently in the biosphere, but may be in time. The buffer zones are Torridon Hills, Loch Maree, Balmacara Estate and FCS land around Balmacara

- *transition zone* - these are between biosphere and rest of world and there is more emphasis on sustainable development of the area, as well as conservation.,

The next steps for the biosphere will be to move from the interim committee to a formal structure. A company limited by guarantee is being established to be followed by charitable status. 18 months funding has been agreed from HC, SNH, Scot Gov and hopefully HIE. This will allow the committee to employ project officer(s) to develop a ten year plan for the biosphere.

In answer to a question Iain noted that community groups will be able to be involved in biosphere plans and initiatives.

The Wester Ross biosphere has a Facebook page, and will shortly have a website.

3) Nevis Partnership: Lizzie Cooper

Lizzie highlighted some of the many activities that are being undertaken by the Nevis Partnership programme over 5 years.

The Partnership is between agencies and smaller groups and has received funding from multiple funders, with the lottery fund being the largest. Lizzie warned that the different requirements of each funder means that programme administration is considerable.

The Nevis Partnership project includes 4 programmes (conservation and repair, community engagement, access and learning, training) containing 19 projects. 6 staff run the programme.

The 19 project briefs were written by different organisations and then streamlined to make a coherent, interdependent programme. The powerpoint pdf contains details of a number of these projects, such as archaeology, woodland work, path work and wildlife monitoring.

The programme also includes a number of longer term projects, such as: ‘

- Carpe Diem’, which offers outdoor adventure linked with litter picking,
- Future Forests - which involves working with schools and propagating and growing on Glen Nevis pines
- Ben Nevis North Face Survey - which brought together climbers, botanists, geologists and mountain guides. A 3-D map is also being produced through the north face project, and will be available as an app.

4) Flows to the Future: Caroline Eccles

The north Highland peatlands are now known to be the biggest and best of their kind in the world, and also to be a valuable carbon storage system.

Flows to the Future is funded by a number of organisations, with the primary funder being the Heritage Lottery Fund. There is 5 year funding for the work, and HLF is helpful in allowing flexibility across project funding.

The Heritage Lottery Fund was attracted to the project partly because of the links to carbon storage and consequent climate change benefits.

Flows to the Future is divided into a number of different work areas - around 30% of the funding is for peatland restoration from previous forestry, and the rest is for people-related activities - including the building of an observation tower, building a field centre and putting in interpretation at key observation points.

The restoration is taking place on a large landscape scale, all currently on the RSPB land around Forsinard. Much of the restoration is experimental and is a continuing learning process. For instance small furrows between mounds are now being blocked, tree stumps are being flipped into the furrows to try and help to get a flatter profile, and brash left in earlier forest clearance is being flattened in order to make the area more attractive to ground nesting birds.

Nowadays the timber is removed from site, and there is a market for small timber for e.g. wood burning stoves. However, Caroline warned that the logistics behind organising this work is time consuming.

People related work:

Caroline noted that promoting the value of peatland can be a hard sell, and that this was added to by the fact that much of the wood removal is taking place above strath level, and so is hidden. The interpretation boards are designed to attract people to good peatland vantage points.

The new field station is now able to host monitoring and research students, community groups, interest groups etc, who want to use the peatland as a place to learn.

The land management advisory officer works with and managers to support them in getting funding for restoration work. One land owner was attracted to this scheme because of the potential to improve fisheries through better peatland management.

The schools officer is involved visiting schools and in a teacher training programme which gives them the confidence to take out groups themselves. There have also been other school connected activities eg Tongue school created art work that was used in a film about the peatlands. Children from Farr Academy were also able to get work experience linked to this project, through assisting the film crew. The film was screened by Screen Machine in the school grounds attracting both children and their families.

In answer to a question Caroline noted that after restoration work peatland recovery can begin to be seen within a couple of years.

Panel discussion

Panel discussion ranged over a number of topics including:

Landscape-scale projects:

Top tips from the projects were:

- 1) Make sure you have all the facts to back your proposal
- 2) Have a clear objective
- 3) Get community support
- 4) Avoid becoming a talking sho
- 5) Think about long term planning (biosphere enables this).
- 6) Have some ambition and then then temper it with realism
- 7) Allow for realistic amounts of staffing.
- 8) Don't chase the funding. Find a suitable funder for your vision.
- 9) Talk to funders and find out what they are looking for

Does Heritage Lottery Funding provide greater flexibility to move budgets across projects than the Lottery funded landscape partnerships? The overall consensus was that they are probably similar.

Planning:

How to have a influence on the planning regulatory service - e.g. ensuring conditions set by planning are met? (the example of the Flows to the Future working to restore peatland in one area, whilst SSE tracks were damaging another was given).

At present no such mechanism for guaranteed information sharing exists.

Can there be a Highland-wide charter for the sea? Marine Protected Areas and marine planning zones should provide the guidance and measures for sustainable management of and the marine environment in the areas covered. There will be three marine planning areas in Highland.

(planning may be a potential theme for a future forum, roughly 50% of attendees would be interested in the subject)

Workshop: Future priorities for the Highland Environment Forum

Introduction

George Hogg, SNH

George outlined the current community planning hierarchy and plans for the future which are to:

- Move to a Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) (replacing the Single Outcome Agreement)
- Continue to have reducing inequality as the primary focus. .At present inequality continues to rise inspite of counter measures. The LOIP will provide greater focus on creating and recording new initiatives, rather than those already underway. The first LOIP must be in place by October 2017.
- Retain the pan Highland partnership board and chief officers group.
- Establish 9 local community partnerships each with an agency leader. These are:
 1. Caithness - HIE
 2. Sutherland - Police Scotland
 3. Easter Ross - Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
 4. Mid Ross - NHS Highland
 5. Skye, Lochalsh and Wester Ross - HIE
 6. Lochaber - NHS Highland
 7. Inverness - Highland Council
 8. Nairn - Police Scotland
 9. Badenoch and Strathspey - Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

each area will have the freedom to work with a range of partners as they choose.

- Create Locality Plans - These will focus on a relatively small community - to date 24 have been provisionally identified in Highland, selected by using two indexes of deprivation. The aim is to have these underway by October 2017. Each area may address a different theme.
- Create community learning and development and other sub-Highland plans - which will be open to environmental suggestions, and will include, for example, ranger activities.

George invited participants to think about how the environment may continue to play a part in this process.

Workshop questions:

- 1) Does the Highland Environment Forum still have a useful role to play, and if yes what is that role?
- 2) What role might the environment play in the new community planning approach and in the delivery of outcomes to address inequalities?
- 3) What should be the priorities of the Forum going forwards?

Workshop feedback:

1) Does the Highland Environment Forum still have a useful role to play, and if yes what is that role?

Everyone agreed that the Forum has a useful role to play.

Ways in which the Forum is useful are:

- keeping the environment on the political agenda
- networking and sharing
 - ideas
 - information
 - views
 - contacts
- attracting a diverse audience with a range of views, who can debate difficult subjects.
- having the potential to influence others

- *opportunities to:*
 - get involved in policy and strategy development
 - information dissemination (local plans etc)

- *resourcing:*
 - it is important that HEF is funded to continue - perhaps more partners might share the cost.

2) What role might the environment play in the new community planning approach and in the delivery of outcomes to address inequalities?

- There was concern that the environment might lose traction in the new structure and a strong feeling that there should be an environmental section of the new LOIP
- HEF input into Highland-wide LOIP
- Individual HEF members input into each of the 9 community planning partnerships - Lochaber is a good example, as includes the Lochaber Environmental Group
- increasing opportunities for community input into local land use

3) What should be the priorities of the Forum going forwards?

- Highlighting the importance of having access to a high quality environment
- Promoting the environment as key to future economic and wellbeing success of the Highlands
- Using the Forum to advise political decision-making
- Highlighting consideration of environmental protection - including of Eu designated sites - in the light of Brexit
- Highlighting the challenges for voluntary groups who are being asked to provide more services, but with less funding available
- Having the potential to hold organisations/agencies and businesses to account
- To explore the potential to link with the creation of community learning and development plans by the 9 community planning partnerships
- Ensuring good communication of environmental news and issues, both amongst Forum members and wider.