

Magical places amazing wildlife

Julie Forrest, Interpretation Group Manager, at Scottish Natural Heritage, takes stock of interpretation at National Nature Reserves

Loch Lomond, The Cairngorms and St Kilda (pictured above) are familiar names to people living in Scotland. But the fact that these sites are also National Nature Reserves (NNRs) is still a well kept secret. NNR's represent the very best of our wildlife, habitats and landforms. Protected by law, they are owned and managed by a variety of organisations and individuals. As long as these places are being protected does it really matter whether people know about them or not?

Well, at Scottish Natural Heritage we think it does. Public money is being used to manage and protect them: we would like everyone in Scotland to know these wonderful places exist and why they are of such great importance, not only to the species that live there but also to each of us, as places where we can see and experience nature first hand. For the last few years SNH and our partners have been making a concerted effort to raise the profile of NNRs.

Raising the profile

So far we have re-signed all reserves, up-graded or provided new visitor facilities at a number of key sites, developed a house style for NNR publications with the aim of all reserves having a leaflet by 2006, produced a gazetteer that lists all NNRs, set up a dedicated website which includes details of all public events happening on reserves, and have just completed a TV film that we hope to have broadcast in the near future.

A lot of this promotion is about raising people's awareness that the sites exist, but we are equally keen to encourage people to visit and experience these special places for themselves. This is where good on-site interpretation can help to enhance a visit, lead to greater understanding and enjoyment of the site and hopefully engender public support for their long-term future.

Getting our interpretation right

The availability of European funds in the Highlands and Islands in the mid to late nineties, combined with Heritage Lottery Funds, gave SNH an opportunity to put forward ambitious proposals to upgrade the visitor facilities at Knockan Crag, a geological site to the north of Ullapool, and at Beinn Eighe NNR near Kinlochewe in Wester Ross. Although money is not everything, as many of you with small budgets but lots of creativity know, this extra capital did make it possible to deliver some exciting and high quality interpretation.

The interpretation plan for Knockan set clear objectives to help guide the development of the interpretive content, but it was not expected that visitors would then remember all the factual information covered by the objectives. Rather it was hoped that the key themes would have the most impact and be most memorable. Recent visitor surveys have confirmed that the great majority of visitors are able to identify the main themes. Perhaps most importantly 93% found their visit enjoyable. Visitor surveys are now underway at Beinn Eighe and the results will go on our website in due course.

Interpretation at both Knockan Crag and Beinn Eighe received Interpret Britain Awards from the Association for Heritage Interpretation; due recognition that the approach adopted by SNH has resulted in some first rate interpretation.

So what next ...

Learning lessons and ensuring future projects, large or small, follow the good practice at Knockan and Beinn Eighe will be a priority.

Pre-testing of concepts and exhibits is something SNH would like to see done as a matter of course, but finding the budget and time to do this is a real problem.

We are particularly keen to see more local people becoming involved in the planning and management of reserves and this includes being actively involved in interpretation planning. Real consultation and involvement takes time and needs to be planned for.

Local Nature Reserves, which are often nearer to where people live, offer great opportunities for SNH and our Local Authority partners to develop a participative and consensus building approach to interpretation.

As interpretation plans are being used more and more to help evaluate the effectiveness of interpretation, it is important for key messages and objectives to be clear, specific and measurable. The challenge for interpreters in adopting such a prescriptive and planned approach is to ensure that the final product is both creative and appropriate to the needs of the site and the audience.

SNH's website on NNRs is at www.nnr-scotland.org.uk

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The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order.

Alfred North Whitehead