

The song of the bird of the sea

Kat Jones tells the story of a remarkable project that involved two diverse communities in a scheme to interpret their cultural and natural heritage. Its strength was in braiding the strands of education and interpretation together, just as the strands of cultural and natural heritage also hold the project together.

The idea of the Arran Boat Project was to explore the bonds that link two very different communities, Govan and Arran. Both sit on the Clyde, sharing much history, but are very different in aspect and environment. Inspiration for the project came from the late Colin MacLeod, the powerhouse behind the GalGael Trust, who had a vision to link the disparate Clyde communities through building and sailing traditional wooden boats. The project would take trees from Arran to Govan, where they would be crafted into a traditional wooden boat called a yawl, and then sail back to Arran across the Firth of Clyde. The journey would be a hook for all sorts of education, community and interpretation activities.

The scheme had the potential to link communities on Arran to their own natural and cultural heritage, as well as leaving a lasting and mutually beneficial link between the people of Arran and Govan. It would also increase the confidence and capacity of the newly formed community woodlands group, 'Roots of Arran'. Crucially, for my work with SNH, there was the possibility to use this project to interpret the natural heritage of Arran – namely the woodlands and marine environment – to Arran's schools and communities, and to raise a wider awareness of Arran's environment.

We launched the project with a tree-felling event. This tree, along with some wind-blown giants from Brodick Country Park, toured the island schools acting as the catalyst for lessons about trees, woodlands and their wildlife. Representatives from the 'Roots of Arran' followed up with regular visits to the schools while the boat was being built in Govan, and each school planted a tree of their own. Their theme, 'From Seed to Tree' and GalGael's theme 'From Tree to Boat' linked together to form the whole. Eun na Mara (Bird of the Sea) was chosen as the boat's name after a competition in the local newspaper, and GalGael wrote a Gaelic song to accompany her on her journey back to Arran and around the island.

The boat, and her trappings - willow baskets, plaids, knotted fenders, handmade ropes, pulleys and tapestry - became the centrepiece of the educational work of the second part of the project. She was the object of the interpretation. Her weather-beaten crew told the stories woven into her during the year-long project to groups of schoolchildren as the boat made her way around the island. These included marine life, the proud maritime heritage of the Clyde, and the woodland that she came from. More than just a boat, she was an achievement to celebrate, and three community events were organised to do just that. They were very different in character: the first, at Corrie, was a family fun-day where Eun na Mara raced the native Viking longboat

(and cheated!). At Kilmory we were welcomed by drumming, singing, a beach barbeque and an all-night ceilidh, and in Lochranza an educational event completed her journey.

The project successfully involved many people, both on Arran and in Govan. It created a real buzz on the island, and gained a lot of community goodwill, publicity and interest. However I feel that such a symbolic and inspiring project had, and still has, a lot of untapped potential. The limiting factor was the lack of dedicated officer time to maximise the opportunities that the project presented. Given more time we would have looked harder at the bigger picture, drawing in more community groups, particularly from Govan, the Gaelic-speaking community, various craft and traditional activity groups, local marine and natural history groups. We would also have considered how we could build on our success for the future, including making the wider public aware of the project. An ambitious and highly visible project like this is a great way of drawing in lots of communities and individuals. There is a need to ensure that people make the best use of the opportunities that arise.

It is only now I have the space to contemplate the links between education and interpretation in the project that I see the potential of Eun na Mara to continue to interpret the natural and cultural heritage of the Clyde. She draws together the disparate threads of many stories: the woodlands of Arran with their accompanying biodiversity, the historic trees of Brodick Castle Park blown over in a gigantic storm, the endeavours of a community woodland group. In that small boat can be felt the history of the Clyde – from the fishing yawls of the Gaels, to the flourishing industrial shipyards of Glasgow and back again, to the construction of a traditional boat by a group striving to bring renewal to Govan. Who is telling her story now?

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'We don't accomplish anything in this world alone ... and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something.'

Sandra Day O'Connor