

Scotland's landscape

SNH earth scientists, John Gordon and Ness Kirkbride, muse over recent shifts in people's perceptions and relations with landscape, and the opportunities they open up for interpreters.

NK Scotland's landscape is a gift for any geologist with an interest in interpretation. There are so many themes to catch the imagination – drifting continents and Scotland's journey from south of the Equator to its present location; continental collisions and mountain building; volcanic landscapes 'born of fire'; the 'big freeze' of the ice age; living landscapes of dynamic rivers and coasts; and the story of life recorded in fossils.

JG Over the years we've used many approaches to interpret these themes: publications, interpretation boards, good practice workshops, Scottish Geology Festival events and self-guided trails. All this has built up a lot of experience, mostly focused on the interpretation of protected sites and explanations of the geological records of the rocks and landscapes. We've followed an educational approach but hopefully in an engaging way.

NK That's true, but in the last decade or so we've seen a growing shift in interest from local communities and the wider public in the landscapes that surround them. There seems to be less of a desire simply to exploit the physical resource in traditional ways, like quarrying, and a growing recognition of other values that landscape can represent and reveal.

JG I think Geoparks are one expression of this shift in perception and we now have two in Scotland. Geoparks are exciting because they bring together landscape, geology, biodiversity, people and culture within a framework of sustainable development, and they offer opportunities for people actively to explore and discover these elements in novel ways. Explorations of the links between landscape, archaeology, built heritage, literature, poetry, art and music, all reveal different aspects of the interactions between people and their landscapes through time.

NK Scotland is particularly well placed to develop these opportunities. It's not really such a new idea and people have been doing it for years... just think of the music of Mendelssohn, RunRig or The Proclaimers...

JG ... and the poems of Sorley Maclean and Norman MacCaig, Joan Eardley's paintings and Colin Baxter's photographs, and a host of other music, art and folklore. Our job is to keep pace with this new interest and promote a variety of approaches to interpreting and reading the landscape. There are opportunities and challenges not only to develop existing forms of interpretation, but also to offer new experiences in geotourism, to engage local people and to respond to community-led initiatives.

NK Given that many organisations are involved or have a potential role to play, we need clear vision, co-ordination of activities and the development of new partnerships between different interest groups and sectors. That way we can ensure that memorable messages and experiences are identified for particular audiences, and that these are presented in new, integrated and inspiring ways.

Details of Scotland's Geoparks are at <http://www.lochaber-geopark.org.uk> and <http://www.northwest-highlands-geopark.org.uk>

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Nature teaches more than she preaches. There are no sermons in stones.
It is easier to get a spark out of a stone than a moral.

John Burroughs, essayist