Watching Wildlife

The Scottish Seabird Centre (SSC) is a custom-built visitor attraction at North Berwick Harbour. The Centre opened in May 2000, and its principal attractions are four wildlife cameras located on nearby islands (Bass Rock, Fidra and the Isle of May).

Visitors control the cameras to watch amazing live pictures of birds and seals without any disturbance - an excellent example of sustainable tourism. A huge variety of wildlife can be seen at different times of the year, including seal pups (winter), gannets returning to nest sites (early spring) and seabirds (puffins, gannets etc) throughout spring, summer and autumn.

Making it work

A wide variety of technical and logistic issues had to be dealt with in developing the video displays.

The most efficient way to transport the equipment out to the islands was by helicopter: it only took a few minutes and could drop heavy equipment exactly where required.

The camera positions on the islands were chosen for various reasons:

- They had to give both close up and panoramic views of the gannetry, seabird cliffs, seal breeding beach etc, and also views of the surrounding landscape so visitors could orient themselves to the island's location.
- They had to be near a power supply (in the case of the Bass Rock and the Isle of May - generators and solar panels in the lighthouse buildings).
- Microwave dishes have to have a clear line of sight to the dish on the roof of the SSC.

In the case of getting a signal to and from the islands, a microwave link was chosen as the preferred method. A dish on the island receives and sends signals to a dish on the SSC roof (similar to mobile phone technology).

The equipment

The cameras used on the Bass and Fidra were broadcast quality, but did require quite a lot of maintenance. After the Bass cameras were installed, new technology more suitable to this type of use became available. In partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), a 'Big Brother' camera (so called as they are used in the TV show) was installed on the Isle of May, and has been so successful that it is intended to replace all the cameras with this technology. These can focus to a distance of less than 1 metre and have a 20x zoom lens. They are waterproof and can withstand high winds (over 100 mph) and salt spray. Most importantly, they also have a washer-wiper on the lens to deal with the inevitable 'direct hits' from our feathered friends!

Interaction and interpretation

The public see the live images on large screens, and move the cameras by using joysticks mounted on a plinth situated in front of the display. The cameras are auto focus, which makes them simple for the visitor to use. Visitors get the most from the interactive experience by having a live interpreter to show them how to use the camera and to interpret the images on the screens.

The result

The Centre has become established as a major tourism success story. Specific achievements include:

- Over 500,000 visits since opening.
- A long list of awards (including 5 stars from VisitScotland and the 2002 Thistle Award for Tourism and The Environment).
- More than 5,000 members.
- Over 10,000 children have taken part in the formal education programme.
- Very high visitor satisfaction levels (85%).
- A large number of repeat visits (29%).
- Job creation (56 FTE directly and indirectly).
- A major boost to the local economy (over £1 million per annum).

The Scottish Seabird Centre is a tourism success story that uses the latest technology and effective interpretation to create a unique and memorable visitor experience. The Centre is continuing to build on its initial successes, and recently announced a partnership project with the The National Trust for Scotland and SNH which aims to establish a live interactive satellite link between the Centre and St Kilda in the Western Isles.

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Guideline costs for CCTV hardware

'Big Brother' camera - £4,200 each
Microwave transmission system - £12,000+
Independent power source - £6,000+
Control panel and plasma screen - £9,000+
A simple system, using mains power and cable transmission over 2km, can cost £20,000