

Report on Sustainable Tourism day at Cowan House, Inverness.

The day's proceedings:

The day was organised by CIFAL Findhorn (*CIFAL Findhorn is a United Nations Institute for Training and Research affiliated training centre for Northern Europe. It describes itself as a hub for capacity building, leadership and knowledge sharing between local authorities, national governments, international organisations, the private sector and civil society. Despite the grand title, nobody that I spoke to during the course of the day had ever heard of them prior to this event!*)

72 people attended the event, and in all fairness, were a reasonable mix of community groups, private individuals, and larger organisations. Although, very few from the West Coast, and **none** from our own area. Likewise, the morning presentations had a well balanced content from across several sectors.

After the initial welcome by Sandy Dear (CIFAL Director) and Neil Ross (Head of Community Growth HIE), these were as follows:

Tom Brock, CEO [Scottish Seabird Centre](#), North Berwick.

Tom described the background to the centre, which was initially focused on the 150,000 Gannets that live on and around the Bass Rock, as well as up to 100,000 Puffins on neighbouring islands. The centre started out with a relatively simple camera facility on the island which fed back live video to a visitor centre on the mainland. Ten years on (the centre opened in 2000) they now have a network of 16 Solar powered cameras, sited on the islands and key sites around the Firth of Forth, which use a microwave signal to broadcast live streaming images onto giant screens, all remotely controlled by visitors to the centre. This allows close up focusing on the birds nesting, diving or feeding their young, without disturbing the wildlife. Additionally, the centre offers:

- Environmental displays
- Information on migration patterns and general bird related subjects
- A cinema
- Shop and café
- Weekend workshops for children
- Boat trips
- Guided walks around the area and islands
- A year round programme of events and festivals at the centre, not necessarily run by the centre - the local community are able to hire the facility as well.
- Education programmes

Their website has 1 million visitors per annum, with the accompanying facebook page listing over 500 followers. Backing this up, they operate a membership scheme costing between £7 (junior) and £33 (adult) per annum, with a lifelong option of £500. As a result, they have 7,000 members! All this translates into 2.5 million visits to date and an annual income of some £2 million.

Their green / sustainability credentials stem from the fact that they have a policy of only using local products in the café and shop, having a commitment to integrating with public transport where possible, and enabling visitors access to the centre via travel packages arranged with travel operators. Finally, the centre itself was constructed with environmentally sustainable and locally sourced materials, making full use of natural light and ventilation while sourcing energy from both wind and solar power. Very little plastic was used in construction, with wood, stone and metal being preferred.

For a full explanation of the Seabird Centres Green Policy and ethos, click [HERE](#)

Andreas Walmsley, Senior lecturer in Business Management, York St John University

Andreas has several “business” hats – besides the post above, he is part of the [International Centre for Responsible Tourism](#), and works with Leeds University in pursuit of a “Global Working Vision” in connection with sustainability.

The subject matter here was “How to achieve staff buy-in” to sustainability. He was very clear that a sense of urgency was needed here, and that we are not waking up to things fast enough.

The conclusions reached by Andreas were that sustainability needs to be embedded in all work roles from the top down, coupled with widespread training on sustainability issues and solutions. Finally, large organisations need to have a “Sustainability Manager” in post in order to drive the organisation forward and to fully address sustainability. At the moment, very few take sustainability much further than replacing a few light bulbs or sharing a car into work – more needs to be done.

Since the event was principally about tourism, we looked at the “Green Hotelier” website, which was described as one of the best in its field, offering information about a variety of subjects including new builds, ethical eating, communicating with employees, running green meetings and so on. The website is at www.greenhotelier.org.

James Turner, Development Manager, [Hidden Britain](#)

Hidden Britain are a community-focussed, not-for-profit organisation with rural tourism expertise. They help people turn their ideas for developing tourism in their areas into credible projects that promote responsible, sustainable tourism that (*they say....*) can really make a difference for the benefit of the whole community. The website is their portal for tourism projects, [case studies](#), products designed to develop and deliver tourism potential and a number of resources to get tourism projects underway.

Basically, they appeared to be an organisation that are called in to address a tourism issue (dropping numbers etc) and act as a neutral initiator / activist in order to get suggestions on the table, and to then push these through to their conclusion. Their income comes from training provision and consultancy work as per above. It’s at this point I have to comment that ALL of their experience appears to be on the South East coast of England – so I’m open to suggestions as to why they were presenting at a tourism event in Inverness! Nevertheless, James had some pertinent comments to make.

Such as:

- People rarely just turn up to visit a place by accident – they generally need prior information and to be given a reason to go there first of all
- Local people are often ignorant of what is on their doorstep (Comment from local hotelier in Gairloch in response to a question from a visitor – “*Melvaig? Err.....I think it’s in that direction*”)
- Equally, locals can be very cynical about perceived attractions (*Why on earth would you want to go there?*)
- There is a general lack of understanding about tourism structures and processes (ie *Who is Celtic Fringe? What do Visit Scotland do? SNH – They just run that wee visitor centre, don’t they?*). The last mentioned was from somebody who has lived in Gairloch all their life.
- Funding and the interrelation of organisations are very much an unknown quantity

Myles Farnbank, Director of Guides, [Wilderness Scotland](#)

Myles (or more correctly, Wilderness Scotland) run a variety of guided holidays in the more remote areas of the Scottish Highlands – they have been described as being amongst the very best providers of adventure and activity holidays in the trade.

Aside from their website, their facebook page has nearly 1500 followers, and they have a strong commitment to sustainability that is described on their site pages – click [HERE](#) for details.

The thrust of Myles' presentation was that it is of little use providing a "guide" to visitors where the guide simply takes people around a pre-set route, the bids them farewell!

The Wilderness Scotland approach means that each guide is fully trained in subjects such as local (*Highland*) culture – heritage – interpretation and guiding concepts – and sustainability. As an option, they also offer their guides slightly off beat training on subjects such as ethnobotany – weather – natural navigation – and astronomy. As a result, each guide is well versed on a variety of subjects that most visitors want to know about, and this turns the experience into something that is more rounded, informative, and interesting.

The result is that many customers make repeat bookings, and of course, make sure all their friends know about their experiences as well. WS have also now diversified into kayaking, sailing holidays, cycle holidays, and winter activities.

All of their activities are timed and located to fit in with mainline railway stations, and accommodation is always chosen with regard to minimising environmental impact. Finally, sustainability assessments are undertaken for every trip with a view to quantifying environmental, economic, and social impacts.

Jane McDermott, "[Visit Sleat](#)"

I have to be honest, there was no obvious "sustainability" agenda in the actual presentation. However, Jane did comment that their website has a "[Green Sleat](#)" section on it, and this is a really good, clear guide to the varied "green" activities that go on in the Sleat area. Not all of these are to do with "Visit Sleat" as such, but the Sleat Community Trust - click [HERE](#) for their website.

Jane explained about VS's background, development, and future plans. Basically, they are Sleat's equivalent to Celtic Fringe, but are only two years down the road instead of nearly 12 years. As such, their website and membership numbers are still building, although many of the members they have are quite large and influential businesses (for example, the Clan Donald centre).

Murray Ferguson, Director of Sustainable Development, Cairngorm National Park

The CNP was designated in 2003, and covers an area of 4,528 km² (1,748 sq miles) including parts of Aberdeenshire, Moray, Highland, Angus and Perth and Kinross.

Tourism plays a more significant role in the economy of the National Park than it does in any other comparable area in Scotland. Tourism businesses benefit from the special qualities that the Cairngorms National Park has to offer and the exceptional experiences of those visiting it. An extended season, thanks to the three ski centres in the National Park that comprise 80 per cent of Scotland's winter sports activity, also makes a major contribution.

Murray's presentation was quite short (*we were by now running well behind schedule*) and focused more on statistics than anything else. Therefore, I feel the best option is to have a link to a report done a few years ago by Wester Ross's Celtic Fringe Tourism Association on the subject of the sustainable practices developed by businesses in the CNP. This is available as a PDF download from the CF website [HERE](#).

However, there are some pertinent comments to add to this in connection with developments at the park in recent years.

- Guided walks are a feature of many activity providers in the park area now, including Cairngorm Mountain
- The seven main visitor attractions are grouped together under the name CAG (Cairngorms Attractions Group), and have a [very simple website](#) connecting them all.
- They all operate an educational policy, and most have specific activities and arrangements for school groups, including ranger services and presentations aimed at a range of ages and abilities.

The Afternoon Session.....

This was restricted to a relatively short 40 minute block after lunch, and prior to winding up. The subject in our workshop was “Communicating Sustainable Tourism” – draw what you will from the title, but most of the time was spent discussing the Glenug Inn.

Why? Well, the discussion was effectively hijacked by an extremely long talk on the approach to Green issues adopted by the owner (Steve Macfarlane) – he is clearly committed to the cause, and almost came across as a “green evangelist”. Only real ales, no “fizzy” soft drinks, no crisps, attention to minute details on the food menu, heating / cooking methods and so on. Steve commented that he does not throw this at visitors, and that many who stay there do not realise the work that goes into this. What have they done to earn the “Green” label? See [HERE](#)

We came away very impressed, and I think many of us made a mental note to visit the Inn sometime. Particularly as I know some of the staff personally, and have been there under the previous owner, I was interested in visiting again myself. Last time, we had a major power cut, but the bar remained open under candlelight, music was provided, and a great time was had by all. A typical “West Coast” night!

What changes have there been since then? Well..... many! But, as I have learned while preparing the reporteverything comes at a price. Find out [HERE](#). There are enough comments for me to feel that the many aggrieved customers have a point, and at a cost of a double room for fractionally under £100, perhaps we will not be going after all. When we stayed there, it was a third of that!

So, is the lesson that “Green Tourism” often comes at a price that means relatively few people will actually take up the challenge?

Douglas Gibson, October 2011