

Nature Based Tourism in South Scotland – where are we and where do we go from here?

**A seminar hosted by the Southern Uplands Partnership.
18th February, 2004 at Symington, South Lanarkshire.**

The seminar drew 57 delegates representing councils, agencies, initiatives and enterprises from across the South of Scotland to hear a range of lively presentations and to contribute to workshop sessions. NBT was put in context by Caroline Warburton of The Tourism and Environment Forum and Benjamin Carey and Denise Walton from Dunira Strategy. Claire Wager reviewed the Making Tracks grant scheme. Reporting experience gained in the development of Hadrian's Wall Trail and Phoenix Falconry, David McGalde of the Countryside Agency and Adrian Hallgarth made presentations relating to business start-ups and marketing. Case studies were presented on the Fells And Forest climbing and biking activity breaks by Colin Reilly, the potential to use wildlife as an attraction by Zoe Smolka of Red Squirrels in South Scotland and The Galloway Kite Trail by Chris Rollie of the RSPB. Workshops were led by Janet Butterworth of The Whithorn Trust, Adrian Hallgarth, Benjamin Carey with Denise Daly Walton and David McGlade, the notes from the workshops are below. The Nature Based Tourism seminar was hosted by The Southern Uplands Partnership and generously sponsored by South Lanarkshire Council, Dumfries & Galloway Council and Scottish Borders Council

Nature Based Tourism Workshop Notes

1. How to make more use of the cultural resource – led by Janet Butterworth of The Whithorn Trust.

Presentation on the Whithorn dig, we heard how after 20 years of archaeological research, and some amazing research results (including the age of the site, showing that Whithorn is even more important as the earliest Christian community than had previously been thought) - the main dig is now finished.

Great success recently with reconnecting the community with the Dig - a 'mediaeval-meets-mardi-gras' festival. (It appeared that for some time there had been poor communications between the archaeologists - visiting academics and student volunteers - and the town. Some local people had little connection with or knowledge of the dig. This was to a great extent a sign of the times, these days more effort would and should be made to connect local people with their heritage). The Trust had always struggled to find funding, and even now are having to fund the publication of books to document the findings of the archaeologists.

- We have some wonderful cultural heritage, especially (in the Southern Uplands) Celtic/iron age forts, the places where there had been giant wooden crosses on the hilltops. Even our reiving history is amazing - the

- thieving and raiding continued much longer in the Borders/Galloway than anywhere else in Europe.
- Genealogy very important, esp for families who have left the region (tourism)
 - We take our heritage too much for granted
 - The councils produce some good archaeo interpretation booklets, but there is a need to transfer 'expert' knowledge to the people.
 - It took Whithorn community ages to regain its confidence in its own dig (the 'knowledge' had been controlled by experts)
 - At Kirkconnel, the local initiative persuaded the older members of the community to go into the schools and talk about local history to the pupils. This group successfully involved the community. Importance of local people with local knowledge, stories passed on to them by grandparents, shepherds, foresters.
 - In the Western Isles, a successful cultural initiative was started by a group who had originally been opposing a quarry development - good to see fighting energy turned to a positive outcome.
 - Need more education - local history- in the schools. Stories, place names, traditions are all clues to learn history
 - Events (fairs, quests, festivals) are a good way to involve children and others. For example, one village primary school held a procession, something they will all remember for ever. (Would need to hold once every 7 years)
 - Visiting places is a good way for people, businesses and young people to learn about places - for example, the Open Doors initiative
 - Culture can be used as a tool to increase community cohesion, help integrate locals and incomers/commuters
 - Statutory organisations can create barriers, so best if community cultural initiatives are bottom-up. Communities must not lose their own identity
 - Need a way to document local stories. May need a fulltime/committed project officer to do this before it is too late and the older people are gone.
 - Need a soft touch cultural strategy, if at all - need advice and funding from a national level, but action at a local level.

Conclusion - importance of local community involvement/action in any cultural heritage initiative. Probably best to have many bottom-up activities happening randomly in various places, funded encouraged and advised by national/regional people. Events are a good way linking people with their heritage. May be important to gather local history, stories, traditions now before it is too late.

2. Funding for NBT and Making it Pay - led by Adrian Hallgarth, Phoenix Falconry

- Partnership and co-operation are very important
- Business end focus

- Must be run as a BUSINESS
- Training/skills gap in business skills (and education regarding the environment)
- Clusters/co-operatives can provide the full set of skills and engage everyone.
- Tourism must be seen as a benefit

FUNDING

- Coordination of funding, components – better
- Balance between public/private funding differs at different stages – viz national/private company
- Dialogue between public/private interests needs to be better and earlier

3. Marketing, when, where, what, how? – led by David McGlade, Countryside Agency

- NBT cannot be based on a single item – bird, walk, etc – need to move from the “product” to the “experience” - a whole package - attraction, good environment, facilities, interpretation, services. On this basis clusters/co-operation work well.
- Work with, not in opposition to, other local attractions. This gives best value from marketing spend, opportunities to pool market research, more influence when lobbying agencies or asking for support. An all-Scotland web portal for NBT could work well.
- Don't be too narrow when considering the market. Most visitors won't be “specialists”, remember those within reach for a day or overnight visit.
- Partnership has pros and cons. Large partnerships risk being unwieldy. A successful partnership usually needs a strong leader/champion to get it started. Friends groups or a Trust can help maintain momentum. Important to become self sustaining so that progress and momentum continue when/if the leader moves on.
- Reputation sells, branding is key and must be controlled. Don't market the product before its ready or if facilities are not up to scratch, bad news travels faster than good. Remember capacity, take care not to compromise your asset or alienate other locals.
- Focus on what the customer wants – not what you want to give them. Ask for feedback, listen to it, respond. Learn from mistakes.
- Many NBT enterprises will be small and have a limited marketing budget. True enthusiasts sell their business through their enthusiasm, initiative and energy, word of mouth advertising is still the best . Try for editorial which is free and carries weight.

4. Development of clusters – how should they work and who leads? - led by Benjamin Carey and Denise Daly Walton, Dunira Strategy

After a brief presentation on what a cluster might look like – discussion centred on how to grow more clusters along the lines of the Red Kite Trail. It was agreed however that clusters should not be based solely on natural heritage – it was important that they included other attractions such as parks, galleries, big houses, theatres, golf-courses. The local cluster would then be able to attract and keep a wide range of visitor and give them a range of quality experiences. Data on these other attractions needed to be mapped onto the NBT clusters.

It was agreed that there was a need for someone to drive the process – it was unlikely to happen without at least one really dedicated person to pull things together, seek the funding, negotiate with the appropriate bodies and keep the partners informed and active. It was felt that this role could be played by an outside agency (such as the RSPB) or by local entrepreneurs (where they could see the benefit of the development). It was accepted that in many cases, the driving force is not present and therefore developments may be few.

It was felt that there are more entrepreneurs out there than we think – but they need to be identified and encouraged.

It was agreed that communities needed information about what they had available to them – as this was the resource that could have value added to it. “Community audits” – the provision of information on archaeology, biodiversity, geology, history, access routes etc – in an easy to understand form (GIS maps?) to communities would be a good starting point. This information needed to be put in a wider context – so that the relative value of local resources was understood. Clearly there are links to the idea of environmental resource centres here. It was also felt that much of this information was already held by the communities (especially in retired people) but needed to be shared. Good local guides were seen as very valuable.

This linked also to the need to record local stories and history and to identify and nurture the local characters and the stories they can tell as this is a very valuable resource in itself. Training (in communication and/or natural heritage) for such people was agreed to be a good idea – adding value to local human resources.

It was accepted that community projects tend to be slow and they evolve over time. The people involved have other jobs and interests and cannot be expected to devote significant time to a new project. For this reason community-based projects often do not fit well with short-term grant schemes. Community ownership of a project is vital if it to be long-term and sustainable. This ownership also takes time to develop and cannot be “forced”.

It was felt that there were two different approaches – one driven from the top – with a strategic framework for nature-based tourism (clusters, grant schemes, agency partnerships) and the grassroots projects being developed bottom-up which were expected to fit with the framework. While some conflict might arise, it

was felt that both approaches were needed and should allow stronger projects to develop. Whose vision are we working towards? It was felt that a strategy was a guideline and should not suppress spontaneity.

The potential role of a cluster development officer was discussed – someone to “hand-hold” groups while they started to develop a cluster approach.

It was felt that linear clusters needed to be considered as some footpaths were clearly of this type. It was also suggested that some themes could be clustered – e.g. salmon-based or bird-of-prey.

The advantage of a functioning cluster was that budgets for marketing and promotion could be shared and lobbying power was increased. There were opportunities for web-portals, links to a wide range of issues and other clusters. Good ideas could be shared.