

FAIR ISLE'S EFFORTS TO SAFEGUARD ITS MARINE RESOURCE – AN UPDATE

This note is to bring readers up to date regarding the Fair Isle community's efforts to be considered as Scotland's first marine national park, and allied sustainable maritime planning developments.

Marine National Park (MNP)

The Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) person charged with evaluating potential MNP sites, Pete Rawcliffe held a meeting in Scalloway on 13th December 2005 and planned to come into Fair Isle the following day. Sadly, Mr Rawcliffe and accompanying SNH Shetland staff cancelled their flights at the last moment because of a poor forecast. Ironically, the plane did meet its schedules that day so they could have got in and out again!

The no-show was a huge disappointment and frustration for the isle. A lunch time meeting at the community hall had been arranged and, despite it being a working day, most of the population was intending to be there.

Following their non arrival, SNH Shetland took the initiative to phone me so that I could have a one-to-one telephone conversation with Mr Rawcliffe. Feedback from the Scalloway meeting led me to believe that he had received a fairly negative if not hostile reception by some Shetland representatives and I detected this in his comments to me (though he never said this directly). We spent the best part of an hour in conversation during which time we went through all the boxes he wished to tick regarding suitability. I was able to address all of these and I detected a gradual change in his attitude as the conversation progressed. The big sticking point, for him, was accessibility. I pointed out that it all depended on the definition of accessibility. With the new pier and breakwater at North Haven we get yachts from all over the world calling in (mainly from the UK and Scandinavia, but regularly from the States and even from the Falkland Islands); John Best informed me that he sends Christmas Cards to all those who sign the Visitor's Book at the Chapel and this year he sent to 46 countries; the Fair Isle website, managed by Dave Wheeler, gets a huge number of hits. Also, I argued, the warmth and friendliness of the Fair Isle community meant that folk visiting the isle are made to feel welcome and part of the community from the moment they set foot on the isle – and beforehand, if they come by Good Shepherd!. Thus, in the sense of integrating visitors into local life, we must be one of the most accessible communities in Britain!

Comments from Mr Rawcliffe suggested he was listening - indeed at one stage he said "go slower, I am writing all this down". One comment I made was that we had been told the evaluation would give high priority from the outset to consulting with local communities, but yet again we were being by-passed, effectively excluded (whatever happened to the government's much vaunted "social inclusion" policy). This prompted him to state that he would return to speak with the isle, but this could not be arranged before March at the earliest.

Similar comments to SNH Shetland prompted them to promise a visit early in the New Year. This visit took place on Friday, 27th January 2006, and is reported on below. This finally (partially) addressed something we have been requesting for years - consulting with the community.

The SNH Shetland visit

This was billed as "a briefing by Scottish Natural Heritage on Marine National Parks" and was held at Schoolton at midday on Friday 27th January. Schoolton was chosen because a sizeable proportion of the community was away, including a good representation at the Celtic Connections music festival in Glasgow, so the Fair Isle hall was deemed too big. In the event, the meeting was packed out. Virtually all those available to come did come and for late comers there was standing room only.

The SNH Shetland officials, John Uttley and Karen Hall, outlined the process currently under way to identify potential sites for Scotland's first coastal and marine national park and then opened up the meeting to discussion. Islander after islander fired questions and made comments, all making it clear how supportive they were of the process or any similar initiative to bring sustainable management to Fair Isle's marine area; and how necessary and important it was to the isle – economically and socially as well as environmentally.

Concern was expressed that the Fair Isle cause was not being recognised and that the isle was slipping down the list of sites under consideration. Concern was also expressed that Fair Isle aspirations, and tremendous efforts for nearly two decades, had fallen on deaf ears and that the isle remained excluded from any say in its own marine resource – despite the entire island community being pro-active in trying to safeguard it.

The SNH representatives were reminded that Fair Isle's Council of Europe diploma renewal, approved by European ministers in 2005, asks for "*The establishment of a marine protected area in Fair Isle adjacent waters in consultation with the Fair Isle's Community representatives*". The comment was made that Scotland and the UK are signatories to the Council of Europe so why was this condition not being carried forward?

The islanders also expressed surprise at press reports that some areas were being favoured despite vociferous opposition while Fair Isle, where there is consensus for it, was in danger of being overlooked. The ideal situation would be if Fair Isle was part of a National Park which incorporated other parts of Shetland, but if there was not consensus for that, this should not deter decision-makers from considering Fair Isle on its own.

The SNH representatives insisted that no decision had yet been made but urged the community to re-double its efforts to make its aspirations known as widely as possible and to seek support amongst councillors, MSPs and other people in decision-making positions.

Follow-up action – press release

Prompted by the above recommendation, I wrote a summary of the meeting (not dissimilar to the comments appearing above and sent it out as a Press Release). This has been picked up by the Green MSP, Eleanor Scott, who issued a press release of her own, as follows:

GREEN MSP MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release, Wednesday 1st February 2006

GREEN MSP BACKS FAIR ISLE BID FOR FIRST MARINE NATIONAL PARK

The enthusiasm and commitment from the Fair Isle community for their bid to be the site for the first Marine National Park should be a key factor when sites for the first such park are considered, Eleanor Scott, Green MSP for the Highlands and Islands said today.

Islanders gathered at a packed community meeting last week for a Scottish Natural Heritage briefing on Marine National Parks and to express their concern that the Fair Isle case was not being recognised and that the isle was slipping down the list of sites under consideration. There are fears that Fair Isle's tremendous efforts over the last two decades, had fallen on deaf ears and that the isle remained excluded from any say in its own marine resource – despite the entire island community being pro-active in trying to safeguard it.

Highlands & Islands Green MSP Eleanor Scott said, "The importance of this briefing by SNH was fully appreciated by the islanders who turned out in force for it. Fair Isle is unique among the proposed MNP sites for the strength of the community support for the scheme. The Fair Isle community has a strong record of concern for the sustainable management of Fair Isle's marine area; and sees this as necessary and important to the isle – economically and socially as well as environmentally."

Dr Scott explained, "Green MSPs are very much in favour of Marine National Parks but only where the designation can mean more than signposts and letterheads. National Parks must become beacons of good practice and models of community participation and sustainable land use. In my opinion the strong support shown by the islanders on Fair Isle for the concept of Marine National Parks and their enthusiasm for Fair Isle to lead the way in this area must not be ignored. The first Park set a precedent for subsequent parks and I believe that Fair Isle can do this."

OTHER NEWS - SSMEI

Events have not all been negative. at the end of December I received an email from Martin Holmes inviting FIMETI to join the Scottish Sustainable Management Environmental Initiative (SSMEI) Shetland pilot steering group. To overcome availability problems and to limit costs, Fiona Mitchell and I have agreed to share this commitment (Fiona will attend if she is out anyway, as our Community Councillor, and when I am not available). We have made it clear that we will play a full and enthusiastic part in this initiative but wish and expect to see real and sustainable outcomes result from it: we have wasted a lot of time over the years attending sterile talking shops.

Jonathan Wills and the Shetland Tourism Association

Jonathan Wills has put together a very thoughtful and comprehensive paper in his role as Chairman of the Shetland Tourism Association. He effectively sums up all the benefits to Shetland accruing from Marine National Park status. The paper has been circulated widely. I hope this will re-focus the minds of the doubters and lead to positive repercussions for Shetland.

Nick Riddiford

*Chairman, Fair Isle Committee & Community Association
and Coordinator Fair Isle Marine Environment & Tourism Initiative
2nd February 2006*