



BIODIVERSITY
THE VARIETY OF LIFE

**HIGHLAND BIODIVERSITY FORUM 2010
REPORT**

**GREAT GLEN HOUSE, INVERNESS
SATURDAY 13 MARCH 2010**

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1.0 BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

The Highland Council area holds at least 40% of the high priority species listed in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), which makes Highland the most important place in the UK for threatened, rare and declining biodiversity.

The Highland Biodiversity Partnership was set up to provide guidance and support to an existing network of local biodiversity groups, and to make progress on the key strategic biodiversity issues in the Highlands. The Partnership meets twice a year to discuss biodiversity matters in Highland, whilst a wider Highland Biodiversity Forum meets annually to hear about progress and provide feedback to the Partnership.

The 2010 Highland Biodiversity Forum event was held at Great Glen House, Inverness, from 10.00am – 4.00pm on Saturday 13th March 2010. The purpose of these events is to provide an opportunity for all those involved and interested in Highland's biodiversity to find out more about what is happening at both local and Highland-wide levels. The focus for this event was "Looking Ahead", including the launch of the new Highland Biodiversity Action Plan (2010-2012), and discussing prospective local projects and joint working.

58 participants attended from a range of organisations and local groups (see Appendix One – Attendee Listing). The event was chaired by Councillor Audrey Sinclair, (the elected Independent Councillor for Highland Council Ward 06: Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh) who is also a member of the Council's Land, Environment and Sustainability Committee, Secretary of the South West Ross Field Club, and a member of the Skye & Lochalsh Bee Keeping Association.

Feedback from the event indicated that all the participants (100%) found the presentation and updates sessions very or quite useful, while 85% of participants found the workshops very or quite useful. Three quarters of participants said that they intended to take action on the issues raised during the day. (See section 10 – Feedback for more details).

The feedback from this event indicates that the 2010 Highland Biodiversity Forum was a success. Participants had an opportunity to find out what is happening, and local biodiversity group members had a chance to network with other groups. Discussion from the workshops will feed into the group action plans - particularly as relates to joint working and priority projects.

General comments on the day included

- *"It was very well organised and I really enjoyed this event."*
- *"Let's keep it going."*
- *"Thank you for organising today."*

2.0 PROGRAMME

The programme for the day was as follows.

- 10.00am **Registration**
Tea / Coffee
- 10.30am **Welcome and Introduction**
Chairperson: Councillor Audrey Sinclair
- 10.40am **Highland Biodiversity Action Plan 2010-2012: Launch & Update**
Janet Bromham & Jonathan Willet, Highland Council
- 11.00am **Local Biodiversity Group Plans**
Hazel Bews, Rowan Tree Consulting
- 11.20am **Discussion Session: Looking Ahead**
Local Group Plans, Proposed Projects & Joint Working
- 12.30pm **Lunch**
- 1.30pm **Marine Renewable Energy & Impacts on Biodiversity**
Dr Angus Jackson, Environmental Research Institute, North Highland College
- 1.45pm **Local Biodiversity Projects & Groups Feedback**
- WREN – Progress and Projects Review
Aaron Forsyth, Wester Ross Environmental Network
 - Sutherland Partnership Biodiversity Group - Update
Sutherland Partnership BG
 - PROJECTS: Turning ideas into action.
James Merryweather, Skye & Lochalsh Environment Forum
 - Community Green Spaces Wildlife Audit Project
Martin Hind, Highland Council Rangers / Ross & Cromarty (East) Biodiversity Group
 - Merkinch Local Nature Reserve
Katy Martin, Highland Council Rangers / Inverness & Nairn Biodiversity Group
 - Lever & Mulch – Rhododendron removal technique
Donald Kennedy, Lochaber Biodiversity Group
 - Caithness Biodiversity Group - Update
Mary Legg, Caithness Biodiversity Group
- 4.00pm **Feedback, Conclusions and Closing Remarks**
Councillor Audrey Sinclair

3.0 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The event was introduced by Councillor Audrey Sinclair (the elected Independent Councillor for Highland Council Ward 06: Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh). She welcomed those present to the 5th annual Highland Biodiversity Forum event and introduced the programme for the day, before speaking about the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan - copies of which are available from www.highlandbiodiversity.com.

4.0 HIGHLAND BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN 2010-2012: LAUNCH & UPDATE

Cllr Audrey Sinclair – launch of the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan

“The first Highland Biodiversity Action Plan was launched four years ago, and at last year’s Forum we asked for your views on where the Partnership ought to focus its efforts in the next three years. The resulting draft Plan was consulted on last autumn, and we have the finished version here today.

2010 is the **International Year of Biodiversity**. The various Countryside Rangers, Local Groups and others have organised lots of events during biodiversity week in May and throughout the year to raise awareness of the fantastic wildlife we have here in Highland. Raising awareness of biodiversity features strongly in our new Plan, and we think it is very fitting that we are launching it early in this International Year of Biodiversity.

This Biodiversity Action Plan has been drawn up by Highland Council on behalf of the **Highland Biodiversity Partnership**. As most of you know, the Partnership is made up of representatives of around 30 local groups and organisations committed to understanding, safeguarding, restoring and celebrating biodiversity within Highland.

It aims to provide guidance and support to the existing network of Local Biodiversity Groups, and to make progress on the key strategic biodiversity issues in the Highlands. I am its Chairperson.

The 2010 Plan lists the key issues that have been brought to our attention since the Partnership started in 2005, and proposes a range of future actions or projects that we’d like to undertake in the next three years.

We have made progress on nine of the ten strategic issues that were identified in the 2006 Highland BAP.

The Plan we are launching today proposes 24 new projects, each with simple, measurable targets and an identifiable lead partner.

Of course, these are difficult times for all partners, and funding and resources are in short supply. Nonetheless, we are confident that we can achieve a lot by working together and planning ahead and we hope this Plan will help us to do so”.

Highland Biodiversity Officers **Jonathan Willet** and **Janet Bromham** then spoke about the achievements to date of the Highland Biodiversity Plan, and the priorities identified for the future.

Jonathan Willet, Highland Biodiversity Officer

Jonathan's presentation focused on progress on the 10 strategic issues over the first 4 years of the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan 2006-2009 (using traffic light scale of red, amber and green).

The issues were:

1. Biological Recording System

2. Capacity of Local Groups

3. Invasive Non-Native Species

4. Lack of Awareness

5. Roads; Selection and development of sites.

6. Soil Biodiversity

7. Marine Issues

8. Local Incentive Scheme

9. Sources of Native Plants, especially Wildflowers

10. Wild Harvesting

Status:

Amber

Green - being addressed by new Capacity Building Project.

Green - various projects, lots of interest, movement locally matched regionally/ nationally

Green - constantly ongoing, lots of capacity to deliver.

Amber

Amber

Amber

Amber

Amber

Red - no progress to date but a project proposal in Lochaber.

Lack of progress symptomatic of the management of the Marine Environment - hope for the Marine Act (Scotland) to start to address the issue.

He noted that there had been many difficult issues to tackle and that perhaps they had been too ambitious. However, three were being tackled (local capacity; invasive non-native species and lack of awareness), six had been taken forward to varying levels (biological recording, roads and development, soil biodiversity, marine issues, local incentive schemes, wildflowers) - two will hopefully go green by the end of the year, while the other four are very dependant on national progress) and only one (wild harvesting) had seen no progress.

On tackling the main blockages to progress –the need for common biological recording system; capacity of local groups and invasive non-native species – two had been taken forward and one was progressing.

In conclusion, there had been progress where there was opportunity. Action had been held back in some areas – notably the Marine habitat which is difficult to tackle, hence little action; and in large-scale/ habitat-scale actions - which are beyond the Highland Biodiversity Partnerships influence, but not being addressed nationally.

Janet Bromham, Highland Biodiversity Officer

Janet's presentation focused on the next three years. Firstly, she looked at the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan objectives:

Highland BAP Objectives:

- To improve the management and sharing of biological records amongst relevant partners in Highland.
- To encourage the collection of new records, especially targeting under-recorded species.
- To enhance the capacity of local biodiversity groups to carry out practical projects, raise awareness and contribute towards Highland-wide and national discussions on biodiversity.

- To foster local involvement in biodiversity projects through volunteering.
- To raise awareness, spread good practice and work together to address issues surrounding invasive, non-native species in Highland.
- To raise awareness of biodiversity, with a particular focus on marine biodiversity and soils.
- To improve the understanding of children and young people of their local nature and wildlife.
- To encourage planners, developers and land managers to take biodiversity into account during building and maintenance works, and raise awareness of the main issues.
- To promote the use of land management grants to help local biodiversity, and spread best practice through codes, guides and events.
- To raise awareness of the damage to biodiversity caused by wildlife crime, uncontrolled muirburning and unregulated harvesting, and push for more robust action against the offenders.
- To support the creation of sources of local wildflowers, trees and shrubs.
- To encourage and support local communities to create Local Nature Reserves (or equivalent) close to the main population centres in Highland.
- To encourage allotment & gardening groups to garden for wildlife.

These were broken down into 9 key issues and Janet summarised some of the projects proposed in the Plan to address these issues. Further details on each issue and proposed project can be found in the Highland BAP (2010).

1. Biological Recording & Data Management

Project to help link national partners with local groups proposed.

2. Local Group Capacity

Capacity building project started, desire to strengthen the links between local groups and other volunteers / local volunteering groups.

3. Invasive Non-Native Species

4 projects already underway or due to start shortly on mapping invasive species, co-ordinating giant hogweed & rhododendron control, and an Invasive Species Apprentice through the BTCV Natural Talent Programme.

4. Biodiversity Awareness & Knowledge

6 projects proposed ranging from general awareness raising to working with schools, setting up a group to cover marine biodiversity issues, and increasing coverage of soil biodiversity.

5. Planning, Building & Infrastructure

A joint road verge biodiversity project to be worked up, and guidance & training provided for planners on biodiversity issues.

6. Sustainable Use of Habitats & Species

6 projects proposed ranging from the development of local priority lists to help target agri-environment funds, to a potential PhD project on wild harvesting.

7. Local Sources of Wildflowers, Trees & Shrubs

A project to identify a site, prepare a business plan and deliver a Highland Wildflower Nursery led by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

8. Local Nature Reserves & Community Gardens

The Plan contains a target to create one LNR or equivalent in each population centre per annum, and proposes a future Forum focuses on gardening for wildlife in communities.

5.0 LOCAL BIODIVERSITY GROUP PLANS

Hazel Bews from Rowan Tree spoke about the Highland Biodiversity Group Co-ordination Project. Lack of capacity amongst the Local Biodiversity Groups had been identified as one of the key blockages to the delivery of local projects. The Groups, while all different, share some common difficulties. Most are dependant on the goodwill of volunteers and, whilst there is a willingness to undertake projects, many do not have the time to work up projects, find funding and manage them. The Partnership had recognised this for some time, and finally managed to secure funding to help the Groups get the support they need. Rowan Tree Consulting was appointed in November 2009 to take the project forward.

The key aim of the project is building capacity through:

- Developing a LBAP project plan for each local biodiversity group targeting national or local priority BAP species or habitats (each containing up to 5 worked-up & costed project specifications)
- Preparing funding bids for the local biodiversity groups to deliver the project plans, to be submitted to the local LEADER Partnerships and / or other funding sources as appropriate.
- Arranging training courses for local biodiversity groups locally run and specifically tailored to meet the needs of individual groups.
- Providing help with promotion / running events / marketing activities.

Rowan Tree held meetings with all the groups between November 2009 and January 2010. Discussion focussed on looking at “where the group is now”, and what it has achieved, developing a general vision; a SWOT analysis; identifying particular priorities for action; identifying priority issues for the group; and discussion of potential projects.

The general findings were that there were lots of expertise / experience; lots of enthusiasm, a track record of delivering good projects; lots of ideas for future projects and commitment (often voluntary). **However, it also identified some of the key issues:**

- Need to attract funding for project work
- Need to establish way of making day-to-day work sustainable
- Lack of volunteer time within group to make funding bids, manage projects – and day-to-day admin. Issues of volunteer fatigue? More Volunteers needed?
- Need to raise awareness of the group locally, especially amongst the general public, and attract new members

The discussions also highlighted some strategic issues about the role of the groups

- Do groups have a clear purpose/ vision for themselves?
- How do agencies see these groups?
- Need to identify role of group to ensure that it complements, and doesn't duplicate, work being undertaken by other organisations.
- How much support are agencies currently giving groups, and how much should they give in the future.

As part of their remit in looking at the current and future role for the groups, Rowan Tree are looking at a number of wider strategic issues, including:

1. Should the groups have a strategic role in implementing Local Biodiversity Action Plans, and, if so, what should this be? (And should there be a funding stream for doing this?)

2. If local groups have an important role to play in implementing LBAPs (or other strategic biodiversity initiatives), is it fair to expect them to do this on a purely voluntary basis?
3. If their role is more to deliver individual projects locally, is there scope to set up a Highland wide funding pot for these? But who can administer this?
4. Is there scope for inter-area/ Highland-wide working and, if so, how can this be facilitated?
5. Where staff of agencies, NGOs etc are attending local groups, what is their input ie. Are their employers allocating time for them to undertake work for local groups or is any input purely voluntary on the part of the staff concerned?

Hazel then discussed the projects identified for action by each group, and their potential as joint projects. A number of similar themes were appearing, including:

1. Non-Native invasive Species (Japanese Knotweed / Rhododendron / Mink)

- Training
- Awareness raising
- Taking action
- Recording – how best to record?

An issue would be how to link in with National or Regional initiatives and if in fact this should this be taken forward under the “Highland Invasive Species Forum”.

2. Biodiversity Training and Survey Days

- Awareness raising
- Habitat Surveys
- Training workshops

An issue would be should there be a strategic framework (Highland-wide or local) for deciding what kind of surveys should take priority?

3. Promotional Materials

- Leaflets
- Display Boards
- Websites
- Training – recruiting and keeping volunteers

Need to be clear as to target audiences and how materials will be used.

Hazel noted that work will be ongoing with the groups to finalize the plans, develop project ideas and then take forward funding bids. She then introduced the workshop sessions, which aimed to look at some of these strategic issues.

6.0 DISCUSSION SESSION: LOOKING AHEAD

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION 1:

Q: What is the role of Biodiversity groups?

The 3 groups discussed the role of the biodiversity groups. The outcomes of the discussion fall into 3 main categories:

1. Taking action –taking forward projects and making the LBAPs more than just a talking shop.
 - Need capacity to deal with all projects
 - Resources are stretched
 - Targeting important species (championing the less glamorous but important biodiversity like soil?)
 - Chose projects based on most appropriate actions for their area.
2. Awareness raising and inspiring – engaging with people, educating and promoting biodiversity.
 - Raising the profile of each individual group
 - Facilitators
 - Informing volunteers of national status of projects/ making them aware of opportunities to get involved / linking volunteers
 - Publicity can be difficult – how to deal with this?
 - Connecting local people with their biodiversity
3. Networking between groups.
 - Sharing ideas and experience between groups and with agencies etc
 - Raising awareness of issues
 - Create dialogue, debate and discussion

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION 3:

Q: What type of projects should be priorities?

- Awareness raising and practical action
- Achievable projects (SMART objectives)
- Local interest projects linked to national priority (guidance needed)
- Identify and include volunteers (but avoid fatigue)
- Community led projects (but with professional support/ national experts)
- Partnerships – co-ordination (paid co-ordinators) important (also motivates volunteers)
- Long term projects (but need money and people)
- Sustainability is important
- Outreach to schools (including extra –curriculum activities)- cover gaps
- National and local priorities
- Inspiration projects – future generations
- Funding – look to national priorities to draw funds and plan projects.

The priorities identified indicate a practical approach to identifying projects based on what is achievable, likely to attract funding, of local interest (ie community support) and links to local and national species priorities. The ideas also linked with the role identified for the groups of action, awareness raising and inspiring, engaging with people and educating.

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION 2:

Q. How can Local Biodiversity Groups feed into national and local initiatives?

Feed into National and Local Initiatives.

- Guidance/ encouragement from national level.
- Needs to be capacity to deliver this locally if it is to be through volunteers otherwise people's time will need to be paid for.
- Are national lists of species and habitats useful? Should LBAPs/ communities/ individuals concentrate on managing common habitats (Gardens, road verges, forest edges, waste ground) to maximise their biodiversity and leave the experts/ agencies to deal with national priorities?
- National actions at the local levels should be feasible for local groups to deliver.
- Can't just rely on volunteers.
- Need some kind of structure to coordinate national to local this isn't happening at the moment.
- Need to bridge the gap between national and local.
- Top down approach, who is to deliver action locally?
- Bottom up, volunteers already engaged but may not be taking forward the national priority.
- Volunteers can be fishery trusts, landowners etc not just individuals.

Discussion indicates that while groups are taking action at local level, more support and guidance is needed for getting involved in national initiatives – which is not happening at the moment.

Link/ Learn with each other.

- More outreach from local partnership to local communities.
- Open forum meetings bringing in other groups with similar interests, seeing how they can work best together.
- Spread the burden of volunteering – potentially through the above.
- Contact national biological recording schemes and societies to find out who is active locally, build links, see if support is available from them for events etc.
- Facilitate communication between key groups such as those mentioned above
- Highland Events Calendar hosted by HEN use this as the single place to advertise all events in Highland to ensure everyone knows that they are happening.
- Face to face information sharing sessions.
- Use of local newspapers and radio stations.
- Annual newsletter from the LBAPs, highlight of what has been happening that year or website updates (if every LBAP has a website).
- Up to date contact lists for each LBAP plus folks interests.
- HB Partnership meetings useful for updates.
- LBAP conference once a year - could be rotated round the area.
- Email and website are okay but face to face is best.
- Invites other LBAP s to events/ field visits (needs everyone to know about events).
- The social side of events/ conferences/ field visits are very important for learning about projects and making links.
- Guest speakers from other areas to talk to other LBAPs.

Discussion highlighted desire for face-to-face meeting, events and conferences to share ideas and experiences, along with better publicity of projects and achievements.

7.0 MARINE RENEWABLE ENERGY & IMPACTS ON BIODIVERSITY

Dr Angus Jackson, Environmental Research Institute (ERI), North Highland College spoke about the impacts of renewable energy on biodiversity. He noted that there are many different designs of equipment being used in many different places, and these developments can have an effect on the environment, including:

- Changes in water flow, impacting on habitats
- Change of sediment dynamic
- Change in wave climate, impacting on habitats
- Altered habitats

The ERI are using models, field survey and research to collect baseline data, set up monitoring programmes and carry out targeted research. These look at issues such as:

- Tidal currents - Multiple devices could alter the water flow patterns considerably, research will be done with single devices first
- Wave climate - Inshore zones with high energy and wave energy devices may cause a change in wave climate.
- Effects on biodiversity – including diversity of species and habitats; fish and fisheries, seals, birds, dolphins etc. Research is also being done on sea bed habitats using such resources as diver surveys and side scan sonar.
- Sea birds - Track movements of sea birds to ascertain what impact the devices are having on them; Use visual observations to see any changes in behaviour; Tag and bio-log for accurate monitoring.
- Seals - Satellite tags glued onto seals will measure the change in their activities
- New habitats - Off shore structures can act as false islands, this carries implication for dispersal and connectivity; off shore structures can mitigate alteration of some habitats and have a ‘reef’ effect. They can also influence invasive species.
- Acoustic effects – ongoing research – there is lots of background noise compared to the device itself, but is taken into account.

In conclusion, there is a lot of research going on and the impact on biodiversity is being considered. Detecting change is difficult as there are so many natural changes with the seasons, and inter-annual wave conditions, and we don’t yet have the full picture of how the machines are impacting upon this.

8.0 LOCAL BIODIVERSITY GROUP PRESENTATIONS

8.1 WREN – Progress and Projects Review

Aaron Forsyth, Wester Ross Environmental Network

Aaron reported that WREN have spent the last 12 months trying to promote and enhance the group and to co-ordinate and find their identity.

In 2009, Celtic Fringe approached the group about developing an environmental levy – a fund generated by local tourism that could then be distributed to the local community for environmental projects. Development of this idea is ongoing and as a first step, the group are looking to raise WRENs profile in the area (will involve working with Capacity Building project).

The group had also discussed a mapping exercise on marine resources with the SWT Marine Policy Officer which would have included £200k - £500K spend on projects. However, the group felt it was too large a project for WREN at this time (due to limited capacity).

In the meantime, WREN have developed a website – www.wr-en.co.uk, the next steps will involve optimisation and additional content. However, the main project at present is the WREN Nature Yearbook “Go Wild in Wester Ross” – which is shortly going to print. It separates the months of the year and in each month features six habitats. It also contains work submitted by the local community, including local primary school children. The group also received lots of poems and pictures in response to a children’s competition. Art sets will be given as prizes to the winning children’s entries.

Copies of the yearbook will be given free to all primary 6 and 7 pupils in Wester Ross. One free copy will also be given to accommodation providers in Wester Ross and the remainder will be sold through local outlets for £2.

8.2 Sutherland Partnership Biodiversity Group - Update

Note: Janet Bromham spoke on behalf of the Sutherland Partnership BG

It was reported that the Sutherland group was in a unique position amongst the local groups in that it has dedicated support from the Sutherland Partnership.

The group has a small pot of funding available from SNH and Leader for local biodiversity projects. To promote the group, members are planning to hold a ‘Wet & Wild’ weekend on 16th & 17th May 2010.

8.3 Projects: Turning ideas into action.

James Merryweather, Skye & Lochalsh Environment Forum

Biodiversity is an important worldwide issue, and SLEF is working to raise public awareness of the group and its activities. A logo has been devised and the website set up: www.slef.org.uk. James noted that he felt it would be very beneficial if all groups could set up their own websites in order to build up interactive communication.

A selection of 8 postcards has been printed to promote SLEF. They have SLEF info on the back, in particular the address of the SLEF website, a source of information that can be regularly updated in the way printed publicity cannot.

A selection of 14 posters has been designed to inform and publicise WREN. With WREN’s kind permission, they will be adjusted to suit SLEF purposes. They will be particularly handy for schools, libraries, village halls and events that highlight wildlife and biodiversity. The designs can be amended to show off additional aspects of the region’s wildlife (e.g. insects, wild flowers, reptiles and amphibians).

Education and community activities are also important strands, including workshops and field trips to record local wildlife and the development and control of invasive species. There are several projects up and running:

- Mink – funding has come in and the project is running, survey and control is being carried out in Skye from 2010 onwards.
- Japanese Knotweed – survey and control carried out from 2007 – 2009 which will be continued when additional funds have been obtained.
- Rhododendron – survey and control starts in 2010, probably covering the Sleat peninsula on the Isle of Skye. Public perception of the plant is somewhat clouded by its attractive appearance, so public understanding and awareness will be an important aspect of the project. Have developed a leaflet on the Lever and Mulch technique and handbook is in preparation. A poster is available and James advised that he is available to be booked to lecture on the subject (with the help of his awareness raising “think pink” bagpipes made from rhododendron timber, The Rhoddiepipes o’ Lochalsh!)

8.4 Community Green Spaces Wildlife Audit Project

Martin Hind, Highland Council Rangers / Ross & Cromarty (East) BG

Martin reported that the aim of the project was to get communities involved and keep the interest going. Publicity was generated in papers, radio, website, email contacts list and at Rangers events. This accumulated about 300 contacts who were interested in taking things forward.

Workshops – survey workshops were undertaken and led by experts in the field.

- Scottish Badger Distribution Survey workshop investigated a sett at Contin, learning about looking for evidence of badgers. 24 people attended this workshop. A number of individuals from the Garve area formed a new group and have become very active in various surveys.
- Highland Red Squirrel Survey – 4 workshops in LBAP area by Juliet Robinson to survey Red Squirrels and Dreys in the Highlands. 60 people attended.
- NARRS Reptile workshop – 3 reptile, 3 amphibian and 1 joint workshop. Over 20 people attended each workshop on average. Included sightings of lizards and slowworms.

Other workshops included bat survey training, Dragonflies and Damselflies, Moths & Butterflies, Common Plant Survey, Electro Fishing & Salmon all of which have been very well attended.

All workshops were successful with lots of enthusiasm shown by participants. Feedback from the National organisations who were carrying out surveys that the attendees undertook after the training was very positive with many new records provided for various species in the area.

8.5 Merkinch Local Nature Reserve

Katy Martin, Highland Council Rangers / Inverness & Nairn BG

Katy gave an update (and background information) on the Merkinch Local Nature Reserve. The site comprises of 54ha of land at Merkinch. The local community wanted the land to be managed and “Merkinch Greenspace” were the driving force behind the development of the Local Nature Reserve in November 2007 with support from BTCV, The Community Council, HIE, INE and active community members.

The LNR has had three documents produced which are very useful to the group:

- Management plan – this is the day to day running of the reserve

- Biodiversity Plan – this is how the biodiversity of the reserve is managed.
- Interpretation Plan – this involves naming parts of the reserve in order to identify them better.

Achievements

- Local Nature Reserve held successful celebration days in 2008 and 2009.
- Entrance markers have been erected
- Informational postcards have been designed and distributed
- There is a sense of pride in the Local Nature Reserve - successful partnership working and building a community capacity have been big achievements
- Making paths available to all with improved access and motorbike deterrents.

Green Gym participate every Wednesday, run by BTCV, local volunteers take part in vegetation clearance, footpath improvement and biodiversity recording. Michaelmas Daisy trials are in place to manage the outbreak (pulling and cutting). Local schools are also getting involved.

The Future: Funding bids are in for a trainee Ranger and a full time Ranger and there are plans to develop the old ticket office into a Visitor Centre.

This years' Celebration day in 2010 will be 14 August and Biodiversity Action Day is on 5 June 2010. The community have developed a Rotary Rambling Card, Wildlife recording and an entrance feature.

In conclusion, the reserve is a priority project for the community – they are aware of the LNR, getting actively involved and enjoying it!

8.6 Lever & Mulch – Rhododendron removal technique

Donald Kennedy, Lochaber Biodiversity Group

Donald reported on Rhododendron eradication by the Lever and Mulch Method. The original project aims had been to carry out eradication of 1ha at a test site; assess the success of the experiment; train others; promote the method and hold demonstrations. Overall, the method has proved a success as a fast, efficient, cheap and effective way to eradicate Rhododendron.

The project outcomes were:

- 1ha eradicated at Fiunary Wood test site (and very little re-growth)
- Forest Research Time Study (see below)
- 1 (two-day) Training Course
- 4 Workshops / Demonstration days
- Factsheet

Additional outcomes included the development of new tools including a hammer (used to damage stumps and buds), pull saws, root saws, Adze and tree surgeons belt, and over the period of the project they also refined techniques and increased confidence.

New contacts were also developed with burgeoning promotion with CD, Leaflet, website (www.leverandmulch.co.uk) and Lever and Mulch Manual (forthcoming). These were developed with James Merryweather (SLEF) who also offers lecture tours on the method; more demo events and training courses are planned ... burgeoning interest. (& SRDP support 'probable').

The Forest Research Time Study - published as: Internal Project Information Note No. 1200A/27/08 (March 2009), reported that:

- Approx. 90% killed in first operation
- First op. 6x faster, 4.3x faster, 2.5x faster than three similar studies of cut/burn (they had *almost no* plants killed in first op.)
- Follow-up study (MCW): 24 fragments alive - took 22 mins to kill (9hrs/ha)

Downloads available from: www.morverncommunitywoodlands.org.uk

So what next for the project? Ongoing promotion, training and demonstration and potential for further development including:

- 'Conservation Land Management' article
- NTS Balmacara... April
- SNH Sharing Good Practice 27th/ 28th April
- Savary Point, Morvern (otter holt)
- Training Guide (& certification?)
- SOI Project?
- Highland Rhododendron Officer?
- SRDP?

8.7 Caithness Biodiversity Group - Update

Mary Legg, Caithness Biodiversity Group

Mary spoke about a number of ongoing Caithness BG projects;

Water Vole Monitoring Project: base surveys done in 2005-2006 and 9 sites monitored in 2007-2008-2009 indicate that there is SOME loss in population but no evidence of wide scale decline.

Important Biodiversity Areas: primary data is complete for important biodiversity areas, GIS maps are available and data is being compared with that of SNH. Public meeting planned as well as meeting with relevant agencies to promote the facility

Salmon Berry project: experimental project that aims to eradicate the Salmon Berry which is widespread in Caithness. Rooting up is time and consuming and at present, spraying has proven to be the quickest method.

Wild flower project: aims to increase population of Scottish Primrose and Oyster Plant. Cultivation methods are being experimented with. Growing Scottish Primrose from seed has proven quite successful. Scattering Oyster Plant seeds has been one method, unfortunately, slugs eat the plants. Kidney Vetch has been successful - it has proven to be very easy to grow.

Small Blue Butterfly Project: an increase in the food plant of the Small blue butterfly will increase numbers, Caithness BG has worked with Scrabster Harbour Trust and planted Kidney Vetch in the gravel area there. An interpretive panel will go up this summer.

School competition; 3 year project: this year children have submitted drawings of their local biodiversity and the winners drawings were selected and printed onto a tea towel.

Nectar and pollen project: Caithness biodiversity Group working with Bumblebee Conservation and Scottish Agricultural college. Aim is to provide nectar rich grassland on 10 farms that will be monitored for bumble bees by volunteers trained by the trust.

8.8 Cairngorms Biodiversity Partnership – Update

Stephen Corcoran, Cairngorms Biodiversity Officer

Grants Scheme

Seven projects have been approved under the grant scheme with £31,000 awarded. Many more projects are under development. Funded projects included:

- Survey of mason bee
- Farmland wading birds management

- Lichen survey of aspen trees
- Primary school wildlife garden
- Satellite tags for golden eagles

The scheme will be continuing in 2010 with grants available up to £5,000 at an intervention rate of 95%.

Big Bio Buzz

The Cairngorms Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) is running three 24 hour events (Grantown-on-Spey, Kingussie and Ballater) in the Cairngorms National Park to celebrate the International Year of Biodiversity 2010. The Big BioBuzz Day on Saturday 22 May 2010 will coincide with International Biodiversity Day and Scottish Biodiversity Week. The event is aimed at getting folk involved in exploring and recording wildlife on their doorstep, with the ultimate goal of collecting as much information as possible on local animals, plants and habitats.

Cairngorms Rare Plants Project

This project, starting in March 2010, is targeting rare plants such as twinflower, intermediate wintergreen, lesser butterfly orchid and small cow-wheat. It is a 3-year project with funding from Esmee Fairburn Foundation, CNPA, SNH and Aberdeen University and will be managed by Andy Scobie. The focus is on practical management and research and volunteers are wanted to help with survey and practical work.

In Bye Survey

Project which surveyed 1600+ in-bye fields in Badenoch & Strathspey in 2007 & 2008. It identified farmland is an important resource of species-rich grassland (90+ NVC types) - Badenoch & Strathspey could be the most important area in Scotland for species-rich grassland given its unusual frequency & distribution. In 2010, survey will be extended to cover Glenlivet & Strathdon farmland – all recorded on GIS.

Strathspey Wader Initiative

This is partnership project that aims to raise awareness of the importance of the area for breeding waders; to coordinate survey work and to reverse the decline in wader numbers through working with land managers and assisting them in implementing wader friendly management through agri-environment schemes. Partners include the LBAP, RSPB, CNPA, SAC & SNH.

So far an estimated 17 farms have approved SRDP wader-friendly options covering 700+ hectares in Strathspey. The RSPB are coordinating the 5 yearly breeding wader survey of 50+ farms in Badenoch & Strathspey – volunteers wanted.

Cairngorms Wetland Vision

Have developed a draft GIS inventory showing wetland potential (combined with other datasets).

Working with land managers through SRDP to enhance/manage/create small areas of wetland habitat. Looking to develop 2 pilot wetland restoration projects on the Spey plus 1 on the Dee linked to Wader project.

Wildlife Recording

Developing Cairngorms Record Centre as focus for all records. Creating pocket recording booklet and training programme. A pilot Visitor Recording Scheme being trialled in 5 accommodation providers – with recording packs and leaflet – if successful, this will be expanded to all “Branded” accommodation providers.

Other projects include:

- *Raptor Track* – project looking at golden eagle, hen harrier, merlin, peregrine falcon and goshawk. Aim is to provide info on raptor movements, dispersal and use of habitat; raise awareness of raptors and help to deter raptor persecution.
- *Non-Native Species Project* – inc. Japanese knotweed, Himalayan Balsam & Giant hogweed. Survey of riparian habitats and using volunteers to collect other records. Coordinating control work and provision of training & equipment.
- *Rivers Dee, South Esk and Spey Catchment Management Plans*
- *Water Vole Project* - secure the CNP as a key water vole area, through coordinating and increasing the American mink control undertaken by the local community. Raise awareness of water vole conservation issues and identify more water vole colonies.
- *Wildcat Project* - raise awareness of the wildcat's plight and work with a range of partners and interest groups to safeguard surviving wildcat populations and create favourable conditions for the species to thrive in future.

To get involved in the BigBioBuzz Day or the Rare Plants project or other projects contact: Stephen Corcoran - 01479 870528 stephencorcoran@cairngorms.co.uk

9.0 CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the conference was successful, giving the local participants an opportunity to find out what is happening at a local and national level, and to network with other groups. The discussion from the workshops will feed into the group action plans - particularly as relates to joint working and priority projects.

The event was also an important step in reviewing progress to date and launching the new Highland Biodiversity Action Plan for 2010-2012.

10.0 EVENT FEEDBACK

Delegates were asked to complete and return feedback forms at the end of the event. Twenty completed forms were returned - representing 35% of all attendees.

Timing

1. Do you think this is a good time of year to hold this event?

| | 2008 (MARCH) | | 2009 (MARCH) | | 2010 (MARCH) | |
|-------|--------------|------|--------------|------|--------------|------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| YES | 27 | 96% | 27 | 96% | 20 | 100% |
| NO | 1 | 4% | 1 | 4% | 0 | 0% |
| TOTAL | 28 | 100% | 28 | 100% | 20 | 100% |

All of the attendees (100%) felt that March was a good time of year to hold the event. The only suggestion for another time of year was to make it a little earlier – possibly end of February.

2. Is a Saturday event better than a week-day event?

| | 2008 | | 2009 | | 2010 | |
|--------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| YES | 25 | 89% | 15 | 75% | 13 | 65% |
| NO | 2 | 7% | 4 | 20% | 2 | 10% |
| EITHER | 1 | 4% | 1 | 5% | 5 | 25% |
| TOTAL | 28 | 100% | 20 | 100% | 20 | 100% |

65% of participants preferred a Saturday for the event, with a further 25% having no preference. Of those who would prefer a week-day, this was generally because they were attending on behalf of their work.

3. Do you have any comments on the timing of the day itself?

Comments included:

- *“Bit long – but OK.”*
- *“Fine.”*
- *“Good effort on keeping to time- well done!”*
- *“Good time to get to venue and return.”*
- *“It all went very smoothly.”*
- *“Over-ran on a couple of talks.”*
- *“Slightly longer would have been better for the morning sessions.”*
- *“Spot on.”*
- *“Still a little too crowded, but better than last year.”*
- *“Very good.”*

Organisation

4. How would you rate the organisation of the event?

| | 2008 | | 2009 | | 2010 | |
|-----------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| Excellent | 23 | 82% | 16 | 80% | 12 | 60% |
| Good | 5 | 18% | 4 | 20% | 7 | 35% |
| Average | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 5% |
| Poor | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 28 | 100% | 20 | 100% | 20 | 100% |

95% of the attendees rated the organisation of the event as excellent or good.

5. Did you feel that you received all the information you needed for the event?

| | 2008 | | 2009 | | 2010 | |
|-------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| YES | 27 | 96% | 18 | 90% | 18 | 90% |
| NO | 1 | 4% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 5% |
| N/R | 0 | 0% | 2 | 10% | 1 | 5% |
| TOTAL | 28 | 100% | 20 | 100% | 20 | 100% |

90% of participants felt they received all the information they needed for the event. All participants were supplied with a map and detailed road location for Great Glen House in advance.

Comments included:

- *“I couldn’t find info last minute – I found it difficult in the last couple of days to find details of the event – nothing on website!”*
- *“Programme/invitation in good time. Timing/location/registration well explained/ easy to follow.”*

The Presentations

6. How useful did you find the presentations and update sessions?

| | 2008 | | 2009 | | 2010 | |
|--------------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| Very useful | 21 | 75% | 17 | 85% | 10 | 50% |
| Quite useful | 7 | 25% | 3 | 15% | 10 | 50% |
| Not useful | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 28 | 100% | 20 | 100% | 20 | 100% |

As in previous year, all the participants (100%) found the presentation and updates sessions very or quite useful.

The Workshops

7. How useful if you find the workshop sessions?

| | 2008 | | 2009 | | 2010 | |
|--------------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| Very useful | 8 | 29% | 6 | 30% | 7 | 35% |
| Quite useful | 17 | 61% | 7 | 35% | 10 | 50% |
| Not useful | 1 | 4% | 2 | 10% | 2 | 10% |
| N/A | 2 | 7% | 5 | 25% | 1 | 5% |
| Total | 28 | 101% | 20 | 100% | 20 | 100% |

85% of participants found the workshops very or quite useful, for those who said that the session was not useful, to specific reason was given. Other comments included:

- *“Workshop appeared to have a lack of understanding of agency role. Some good points made but lack of understanding political and legislative implications- discussion with regard to available resources and funding”.*

8. Are there any additional points you would like to make?

- *“More time would have been welcomed.”*
- *“I was sitting at the back and sometimes acoustics prevented voices to be heard clearly.”*
- *“Rotate event around areas in different years?”*
- *“Some issues as previously discussed.”*

- *“Keep plugging efficient networking within and without groups.”*
- *“Microphone required to overcome air conditioning hum and to help soft-spoken speakers.”*

The Day Generally

9. What part of the day did you find *most* useful, and why?

- *“Awareness of what is going on – I was not aware of what was going on in Easter Ross and I am from there!”*
- *“Discussion on local group plans project and joint working useful but forum meant group discussion dominated by few loudest voices. It is crucial to get the plans in a useable form.”*
- *“Hearing some of the talks/update sessions.”*
- *“Introduction of new/ongoing project eg Angus Jackson, James Merryweather. Tea/coffee break interactions.2*
- *“Local Biodiversity Group Plans.”*
- *“Meeting contacts.”*
- *“Networking! All Day!! - rarely get to meet with folk.”*
- *“Presentations – good to get a broad view of what is going on.”*
- *“Project group feedback – information and awareness of groups and projects of which I wasn’t aware.”*
- *“Projects and group feedback and networking!”*
- *“The afternoon feedback/update session to hear about the various projects.”*
- *“The morning sessions and Angus Jackson, well presented subject with gave me the background information that I needed.”*
- *“The talks in the afternoon because everyone spoke well and that progress was being made – not just speaking, but doing.”*
- *“The update sessions to find out what the groups are doing.”*
- *“Workshops – at last I managed to get “my say”.”*
- *“Workshops – enhanced clarity and purpose.”*
- *“Workshops.”*

10. What part of the day did you find *least* useful, and why?

- *“All useful.”*
- *“Discussion session – we went round in circles.”*
- *“None.”*
- *“Renewable energy update.”*
- *“Talk on marine renewable energy.”*
- *“Workshop – couldn’t quite see the point – perhaps too many topics. Value may not be clear until summary/overview comes out.”*
- *“Workshops.”*
- *“Workshops.”*
- *“Workshop – lack of understanding and members in group not prepared to let others have say/dominated.”*

11. Will you or your organisation be taking action on any of the issues raised today?

| | 2008 | | 2009 | | 2010 | |
|-------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| YES | 20 | 71% | 11 | 55% | 15 | 75% |
| NO | 4 | 14% | 4 | 20% | 1 | 5% |
| N/R | 3 | 11% | 5 | 25% | 4 | 20% |
| D/K | 1 | 4% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| TOTAL | 28 | 100% | 20 | 100% | 20 | 100% |

75% of participants said that they would be taking action on the issues raised. Issues to be addressed included:

- *“As a puppet company we are interested in developing a show about biodiversity – in particular about the actions people can take to make a positive difference for sustainable living and conservation. Today we heard about various species/successes etc.”*
- *“Develop links on our website esp. re groups with ongoing projects in adjacent areas.”*
- *“Finding out the Inverness & Nairn Biodiversity Group still exists!”*
- *“Getting involved with recording.”*
- *“Hopefully input into list of priority species.”*
- *“Interaction and cribbing good ideas.”*
- *“More working with other groups.”*
- *“Renewed contact with other groups.”*
- *“SNH work with the Partnership and will continue to advise both from HQ and at area level.”*
- *“Trying to involve local young people with their biodiversity getting some experts in to help. Links between community woods and biodiversity group.”*
- *“Various ideas for our group.”*
- *“We are not a biodiversity group but we could move forward as a recording group (field club).”*
- *“Yes – subject to members of the SWT Inner Moray Firth Members Centre agreeing to expand our activities.”*

12. How can the Highland Biodiversity Forum help and support you further with this issue?

- *“Bring a display or help us get something together for 20/21/22 May.”*
- *“Continue support through biodiversity officers.”*
- *“Feedback will be interesting.”*
- *“Help with capacity building and funding.”*
- *“I’ll be in contact.”*
- *“Inverness and Nairn LBAP and group – get this going.”*
- *“More info on local initiatives eg being in Tain I did not know about the R&C East Project day in Alness.”*
- *“Organisation/funding.”*
- *“Push for funding of ecologist in the Highland Council/Local LBAP Officers for each group and not just Highland wide.”*
- *“Probably with presentations – time will tell.”*
- *“To act as a co-ordinator for the recording.”*

13. Are there any other things that you would like to see from the Highland Biodiversity Forum?

- *“A suggestion from the workshop – several good ideas regards distributing list of experts/specialists to the community groups.”*
- *“Capacity building and funding.”*
- *“Help with publicity and press releases.”*
- *“Interconnection of partners including internet efficiency.”*
- *“Provide support to groups to encourage and enable links/networking between local groups – currently annual forum and ad hoc. Provide info to enable link national/international priorities.”*
- *“To make information more accessible to the general public.”*
- *“To support the unpopular concept of biospheres (badly managed as NNRs – reform needed) to which Scotland subscribed many years ago.”*

14. Do you have any general comments/suggestions about the event or any follow-up events that you think are needed?

- *“A “talking to the press” workshop.”*
- *“Enjoyed the day – a peaceful atmosphere, interesting people and nice cakes/pastries!”*
- *“Feedback from groups always inspirational. In general a useful day but discussion groups too large. Good idea to re-arrange order with group feedback. Feedback pm – still not much time for questions.”*
- *“I do hope that more local BG’s will become better at outreach and communication.”*
- *“It was very well organised and I really enjoyed this event.”*
- *“Let’s keep it going.”*
- *“Thank you for organising today.”*
- *“The Forum could usefully have asked for another half or even full day. A first rate meeting.”*
- *“We need better dedicated area for displays, leaflets etc – Foyer?”*

Feedback conclusions

Overall, the event was successful – creating an annual opportunity for groups to network, share knowledge and experience. All the participants (100%) found the presentation and updates sessions very or quite useful, while 85% of participants found the workshops very or quite useful. Three quarters of participants (75%) said that they would be taking action on the issues raised as a result of the event.

For 2011, feedback suggests:

- Allow plenty of time in programme for the talks (with questions) and workshop sessions – don’t overcrowd programme.
- Having the workshops in the morning worked well.
- Smaller discussion groups

**Rowan Tree Consulting
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