

EDUCATION AND INTERPRETATION

TOPIC GROUP PAPER

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS TOPIC GROUP

Vision

To use effective modern communication methods to create greater awareness and understanding of the Moray Firth's natural environment and people's links with it. An appreciation of the past, knowledge of present circumstances and enthusiasm for new future potential are all part of this.

Summary

'Education and Awareness' is essentially about good communication and creating opportunities for people to continue learning throughout life.

No one person or group is the holder of ultimate knowledge - about the Moray Firth or anywhere else. Consequently, the very core of promoting education (for all) and awareness (of issues and many other things) is not merely the transmission of received wisdom from one group to another, but the creation of something much more fundamental - a structure within which people can learn, discuss, share and change.

This is why the concept of powerful networks is crucial to unlocking future possibilities for such learning around the Firth. A wealth of Firth-related material already exists. The challenge is how to help people to get easy access to resources which can help, inform, entertain and guide them. There is also great scope, in curriculum development for the forthcoming University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) to identify possible areas of teaching and research relating to the Firth, especially interdisciplinary studies.

Three kinds of networks were given particular attention as having great potential to boost Firth-wide learning. **The Highland Environmental Network**, recently strengthened through new cash from landfill tax, is an excellent example of an information-sharing body which enables people throughout the Highland council area to make contact with individuals and organisations which can help them to take forward environmental projects or provide resource material.

The professional Ranger services in Highland and Moray have further scope to encourage groups of local volunteers to form. Part of the aim of this could be to encourage the sharing of local expertise and ideas with both visitors and residents.

But the most important single contribution which the Partnership could make to helping people use such material would be to host an Internet site.

Through its globally accessible information and locally relevant links, it could cast a benign net to give useful structure to what already exists and provide pointers to what could usefully be provided in the near future.

INTRODUCTION

'Education and Awareness'. Almost sounds daunting. At least that's what the members of the topic group established by the Moray Firth Partnership under this name thought when they first convened. It soon turned out that what we were really concerned about was communication - flow of information to enable people, of all ages, to learn, decide, make choices, enjoy life around the Firth.

That's why the group really became a 'communication' topic group. For our understanding of education, going right back to the root of the word, is that it's to do with the 'leading out' of the potential within everyone to enjoy finding out more and then use that expanded knowledge to good effect, for their own benefit or in conjunction with others. Excitingly, this can be a continuous process. Formal education may be part of it, but it is by no means the only part.

Good information flow can benefit everyone - from toddlers to pensioners. A well-received puppet show about shells on a beach, a pack of scientific information to help a school or university project, a directory which puts people quickly in touch with others locally or internationally who can provide them with help, advice or discussion - these are just a few of the things which could be part of such communication.

There is a vast amount of information potentially available which is relevant to understanding, interpreting and appreciating the Moray Firth. Local history, geology, shipping movements, seabed siltation, bird migration, fisheries statistics, weather patterns - the list could go on and on.

The challenge for anyone keen to tap even a small fraction of this huge resource is to find a way in, preferably with the help of an experienced guide. An ideal for many subjects is literally to have a person on hand to advise, assist or even accompany them on a tour.

But practicalities and financial constraints mean that other ways of accessing information will often be the norm. So what is available now and what could be done in the near future to bridge gaps, provide links, do more?

Those were key questions underpinning the group's identification of issues and opportunities linked to around-Firth communication. From the outset, our central concern was for ways of working - the structures rather than the tools. In part, this was a result of our own limited time and resources to consider a potentially vast subject area, which could include everything from data on marine molluscs to the local history of the herring fishery along hundreds of kilometres of coastline.

Consequently, a whole-Firth audit of material currently available for different subject areas of interest to this topic group - such as environmental education packs, interpretative panel texts and general-readership information about marine life, for example - was outwith the group's scope in the first few months of its existence.

But as well as being constrained by time and resources, concern about structures to enable learning and ease communication was pragmatic. It reflected the need to pinpoint the most effective ways of working in current circumstances, which might still have the flexibility to develop as new opportunities arise.

ISSUES

. Gap in provision of locally relevant material for upper schools

Until now, the production of resource materials relating to the Moray Firth has focused on the 5-14 curriculum (primary school and the first two years of secondary school). Group members felt, however, that there is a need to target Standard Grade (S3-S4), Higher Grade (S5) and Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (S6) courses. There are specific topic areas in the syllabus of each of these courses which would lend themselves to the use of materials relating to the local environment of the Moray Firth.

An example from each course would be:

SG (Biology) - The Biosphere topic (among areas which this explores are: parts of the ecosystem, food chains, control and management of natural resources).

SG (Science) - The Environment topic (the ecosystem and environmental issues explored at a less advanced level).

HG (Biology) Regulation of Biological Systems (coverage includes population dynamics, predator-prey interactions, abiotic/biotic factors etc.)

CSYS (Biology) - Organisms and Environments (the marine environment is one of the areas covered).

It was noted that the 15+ age group in secondary school is a difficult group to target, but might be tackled very selectively through cross-curricular activities linked to environmental education and by single-subject initiatives, especially in biology, general science and geography.

Environmental education is not currently a 'regional priority' within the Highland, Moray and Aberdeenshire council areas. This reflects a shortage of resources - both financial and human. In the absence of these resources, it is urgent for other interested parties to identify material which could be relevant to existing S3-S6 curriculum elements.

A further idea was that a **Moray Firth Project**, specifically tailored to the curriculum, might be developed with Partnership backing, then promoted through school in-service training. The Sutherland Ranger - a member of the topic group - is currently planning to use information from seal research which she conducted with Paul Thompson at Aberdeen University's Cromarty Field Station to produce a unit (jointly developed with group member Sean Meikle) for Higher Biology. If successful, this could be used in other schools around the Firth, drawing on locally relevant information as its source material.

▪ **Lack of accessible information on how people have interacted with the Firth in the past** (e.g. how do you tap into your local archives?)

Every parish around the Firth could have many tales to tell, many statistics to glean, about the interaction of people and coastal resources over many centuries, if not millennia. But how can such information be tapped?

Currently, a few specialists will be aware of how to gain access to some of this information. Most other people have little or no idea of where to begin if they wish to learn more about their home area of the Firth, or would like to carry out more detailed investigations, perhaps spanning larger areas.

Making use of such information is of more than academic interest, since it has a fundamental bearing both on perception of community links with natural resources and on wider understanding of the scope for sustainable use of these resources.

Dissemination of information about how to locate and use such material would be an important step in the development of teaching materials relevant to the Firth in both school and Tertiary education, and would have particular relevance to curricular development for the University of the Highlands and Islands.

At present, very few studies of environmental history relevant to the Firth have been published. Given the pointers to resource use in the First Statistical Account of Scotland, published more than 200 years ago, the scope for future work in this field could be substantial.

.Lack of co-ordination in interpretation of natural and cultural heritage around the Firth

Many methods are used to interpret the natural and cultural heritage of the Firth in different places. A locally produced display board in one place, a centrally designed panel somewhere else; a ranger service here, no human point of contact there; a visitor centre here, barely a leaflet there.

Such patchiness and variability is perhaps inevitable, reflecting different interests and resources in different places. At best, it is healthy diversity. But at worst, it can be confusing or frustrating for people who want to find out more about a particular subject or place.

The Partnership could have a role to play in helping to compile a comprehensive list of , for example, visitor centres and sites of interest, showing the types of environmental education activities or other resources that are available there. This could also include a cross-reference system, identifying how a visit to a particular place might tie-in with the school curriculum. This is also relevant to a closely related issue, namely:

. The need for a comprehensive list of material already available relevant to Moray-Firth-linked interpretation and environmental education

As a starting point for future developments in environmental education, all group members felt that there is a need to gather together a reference list of locally relevant interpretative material which is available to schools, organisations and interested individuals around the Firth. A study to identify such material could also help to highlight gaps in current provision.

.Where is the Moray Firth?

At first the question sounds a bit strange. But the term 'Moray Firth' can mean many different things. Oil production site, recreation area, fishing ground, home of a famous group of dolphins are just some of these.

But does it mean the home stretch of coast and water for communities from Wick to Fraserburgh The feeling of the group, supported by some data from SNH work, is that it does not. For in terms of local perception of the coast, 'Moray Firth' is a tag whose epicentre is the Inner Firths and whose relevance can sometimes be seen to dwindle to near vanishing point from the edge of Sutherland northwards and the Eastern boundary of Banffshire eastwards.

Being up-front about the limitations of this term is crucial to forward planning of communications within the Partnership area. It doesn't imply rejection of the term, but does suggest the importance of locally meaningful tags within material which may be made available.

There is a clear need for further survey work to identify socially meaningful community boundaries around the Firth. Is the parish still a useful concept here? How about water catchments? Do they relate to what people think of as home ground? We need to know, for if they are, then such areas can be building blocks in future collection, discussion and targeting of information and assistance.

POTENTIAL

. It's time to have a Moray Firth Partnership Website

The single most important contribution which the Moray Firth Partnership could make in the field of communication relevant to environmental education and interpretation would be the provision of a good Partnership website. Through material within its own pages and carefully selected links, such a site could fulfil several important purposes - giving free access to information about partner bodies and resources through which people could find out more and make contact with groups and individuals who could assist them.

The Internet is already the world's biggest library, with tens of millions of users. It offers speedy, global access as never before to information resources. Already, the Firth is establishing a presence on the world-wide web, not least through the enterprise of website developers and service providers in places such as the Black Isle. New sites currently under construction, such as the Caledonian partnership pages being developed in Munloch, will break new ground by allowing both access to general information and to parts of datasets which can be used for educational projects. Through so-called 'hotlinks' to pages maintained by partner organisations, the Caledonian Partnership can quickly navigate visitors to information maintained by e.g. the Forestry Commission, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Wildlife Trusts and the Millennium Forest for Scotland. It will, in addition, give links to international groups whose pages contain material relevant to the interests of its partners.

The relevance of such developments to the Moray Firth Partnership is enormous. Take the current situation: a school pupil wishes to do a project on an aspect of local fishing history. The conventional approach would be to write to bodies such as local museums, the agriculture and fisheries Department, perhaps Aberdeen University and Scottish Natural Heritage, for information about boats, ports, landings and conservation of stocks.

Then consider the alternative: a quick connection to a Partnership website, where pages relating to all these organisations can quickly be located. Further links can then be made branching out from these pages, with the option of using e-mail for contacting individuals or discussion groups who might provide extra facts or comment. The student can gain a batch of relevant material with ease, and without the need to draw on staff time of many or any of the organisations which may have provided relevant information for the project.

In a nutshell, the Internet's scope as an aid to good communications around and about the Firth is twofold: through the use of electronic mail and through provision of website. All Highland schools are now on an e-mail network, which allows interchange of information and the potential to set up 'conferences'. Usage of the Internet within schools is currently limited by lack of knowledge and lack of funds. There could be great scope for funding from LECs and Education/Business Partnerships working to improve this. Home use of the Internet in the area is likely to expand very rapidly over the next few years, in line with global trends.

Some notable examples of good Internet practise within the Firth area already exist,

through certain very well designed websites and the work of specialist designers such as Calico in Cromarty and Net.media in North Kessock. Both the Aberdeenshire and Moray Councils host excellent sites which demonstrate the sheer power of the new medium. Indeed, the Moray council has led the way in Britain through becoming the first local authority to place its full Development Plan consultation documents on the Internet as part of a major public consultation exercise. Benefits of this approach, as described in the Council's on-line news, include the fact that the site allows the Council to reach people in remote locations, and the disabled, who might otherwise find it hard to get Council information by other means. The information can, of course, also be accessed from all Moray Schools and by any other educational users connected to the Internet.

It is worth noting that The Moray Council was overall winner in the Scottish Enterprise/Winners on the Web award for Communications Excellence in 1997. This site can be reached at <http://www.moray.org> and the Aberdeenshire Council site (which includes details of how to access family and local history sources, including archives of local newspapers) at <http://www.aberdeenshirre.gov.uk>.

A further point to highlight is that at present a search on the Internet for "Moray Firth" comes up with some wildlife tour operator, hotel and food sites, but gives no inkling - or links to - the tremendously varied scope of the Moray Firth Partnership and its supporting organisations. The opportunity is there, let's grasp it!

.The professional ranger service has great scope to encourage development of networks of local volunteers, who may be willing to share their own expertise and perspective with visitors and residents (e.g. school, tourist and community council groups as three different kinds of client). This is neatly demonstrated by the work of topic group member, Doug Hawkes, the Moray Coast Ranger. Part of his work encourages the development of facilities for environmental education and public enjoyment of the beauty of previously overlooked sites. The derelict sand and gravel pit at Cullen is a case in point. Here, Doug has helped to guide the community's adoption of the site, helped local people to secure funding and recognition for the site and continues his involvement by lending technical support for the project.

Interestingly, this ranger service is afforded no capital or revenue budget by the Council other than that necessary to support the post. So while the Ranger's work plan requires the creation and implementation of an interpretative and educational strategy, funding has to come from elsewhere. This has included, for example, money from the Macallan Distillery, Craigellachie, for the design, construction and installation of five interpretative panels at Findhorn Bay, with additional funding from the Local Enterprise Company, Moray Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise. (Elsewhere in Moray, at Spey Bay, Texaco has been supporting provision of interpretative panels and funding aspects of the work of the Scottish Wildlife Trust's local conservation team).

. Traditional guided walks are often a poor way of pulling in the punters and helping people to learn more about an area

There is, however, enormous scope for development of themes (including ones which cross boundaries between, for example, natural history and local or supernatural history) so that outdoor events may attract more people of a wider range of ages. Such events can fruitfully be developed through existing ranger networks, but there is also potential for rangers and others to assist keen and knowledgeable people within an area to share their local knowledge with others.

Again, having the development of a network of local communicators as a priority could help to draw attention to such possibilities and encourage communities to learn from others in the planning of activities within their own areas. There is scope here for promotion of training of leaders and guides and the encouragement of good practise in customer care.

For school involvement in guided events and site visits, assistance with travelling costs could boost the likelihood of participation, as would clear guidance on coastal access.

Community involvement is also a crucial part of the development of so-called **Ecomuseums**

To quote from a recent document, these are community learning centres that link the past with the present as a means of dealing with the needs of a particular society. Their mission is to develop community autonomy and identity. Rather than serving as a storehouse or a temple, both of which isolate objects from ordinary people and require professional assistance for access and understanding, an ecomuseum recognises the importance of culture in the development of self-identity and its role in helping a community to adjust to rapid change. An ecomuseum is defined by the geographic area or audience it serves and is not confined to a single building. Collections are viewed from broad perspectives and organised around a community's interrelationship with its culture and physical environment. In addition to objects, collections can consist of, for example, AV-materials, paper documentation, physical sites, traditional ceremonies, oral history. Inventories are taken of holdings in the community, but people are not asked to turn over valued items for storage in a repository. As a result, training community members to care for items kept at home is a critical function of ecomuseum staff work.

This concept came up late in the discussions of the topic group, but group members felt that it was important to include a description of the ecomuseum concept within this report as a way of drawing attention to some of the concept's potential usefulness within the Partnership area.

.Many opportunities for cross-discipline linkages e.g. through linking environmental interpretation with visual arts

Much of environmental education and interpretation at present tends to be of interest to those who already have an interest. Although this represents something much more positive than simple 'preaching to the converted', it does mean that there is still enormous scope for the Partnership to involve many more people in thinking about the future of the Firth. The group felt that new ways of reaching wider audiences could fruitfully be explored.

One suggestion was that arts (including performing arts) projects can help to inform about the countryside and how to minimise impact on it, can engage a community, and serve to attract visitors (and thus extra income) to an area.

More specifically, interpretation could be used as a tool to help address many of the particular management problems identified by other groups. This group is keen to be able to continue to provide advice on tool components and on future communications strategy within the Partnership. To give a flavour of some possibilities, here is a sample of just some of the things on a long list of suggestions for the toolkit:

Interpretative boards, shelters and signs; demonstrations; hides and viewpoints; audio-visual programmes and films for visitor centres; computer and multi-media interactives; mobile information van/caravan; art and theatrical performances; tape recordings of local events; sculpture within settlements...

Obviously, this list could go include even more. The point of it is to highlight the enormous variety of choices which can be made when interpreting material of relevance to the Moray Firth and the Partnership. Given this variety, further thought needs to be given to an Environmental Education Strategy. An opportunity exists here for the Partnership to make an important contribution to the development of Area interpretation strategies by SNH over the next three years. Three such areas are within the Partnership area, and if Partnership aims are contributed, then this agency might be able to give future help with achievement of some of the Partnership's priority aims.

▪ **Award schemes can encourage good practice**

Initiatives such as the Moray Firth Award Scheme have already achieved some success in raising awareness of environmental issues. The School Ground initiative has already been quite successful both locally and nationally. Elements of the strategy from the this initiative could be worth considering to see if they could be extended to the marine environment.

Some further, brief examples of opportunities to boost environmental education and interpretation work and generally improve around-Firth communications to enhance learning were as follows:

▪ **Existing examples of good practice**, both around the Firth and beyond, could be used to suggest future projects and ways of working. Specific examples cited, in addition to some already mentioned in this report, are the work of 'Mr and Mrs Fish' in helping to make the marine environment come alive for children; Earth Education as a technique for combining science with sensory appreciation of the environment

▪ **Development of CD-ROMs** could be fruitful and useful for public, school and personal libraries around the Firth.

▪ **Community-participation events**, such as beach clean-ups, have potential for local fund-raising (and so wider community benefit) through sponsorship.

Conclusion

Education in the late 20th century now has enormous potential to be seen as being about individual learning, not just formal, curriculum-based studies. We no longer need to put same resources as before into development of material from scratch, but can build on what is already being constructed through electronic media.

Simultaneous with such developments, there is great scope for encouragement of information sharing which has strong community links and local relevance. Global, local, individual - these are the three key elements of future potential in this area, and the time has never been better to take up their challenge.

TOPIC GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Huge thanks from Kenny Taylor, Chairman of the Education & Interpretation Topic Group, to the members who voluntarily devoted much time and effort at short notice to helping its discussions. These people are: David Alston (Cromarty Courthouse), Tony Archer (The Moray Firth Wildlife Centre), Iona Findlay (SNH), Doug Hawkes (Moray Coast Ranger), Jim Leslie (The Highland Council Education Department), Sean Meikle (Golspie High School), Marion MacDonald (Highland Environmental Network), Anne Mackay (Highland Council Ranger), Jo Monahan (The Highland Ecology Centre),

and Ashleigh Tooth (SNH), with assistance from Rachel Harding Hill to get our first meeting off on a productive track.

