

A 2020 VISION FOR TOURISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

I want to talk about a vision for Tourism and the Environment this morning: my vision, Scottish Natural Heritage's vision and, I hope, everyone's vision. I want to talk about what makes our natural heritage so special, and how we can make the most of it as a vital ingredient in one of Scotland's most important industries of the present and the future. And I want to share with you some ideas of how best to achieve it.

The Tourism and the Environment Initiative, which was begun in 1992, has made great strides. It has changed our thinking on the contribution which the environment can make to our tourism economy and it has demonstrated, through the Tourism Management Programme, how action on the ground can overcome obstacles, repair damage and provide greater benefits. But there is now a recognition that more needs to be done. The Scottish Tourism Co-ordinating Group, has affirmed a new, more strategic direction; a greater advocacy role for tourism and the environment and for the work of the Tourism and the Environment Task Force.

In a recent analysis of the Scottish tourism industry, the Scottish Tourist Board identified the "beautiful and largely unspoilt natural environment" as a major strength. It also noted the potential to extend the season, by encouraging out of season activities, including wildlife watching, and by encouraging quality through the promotion of traditional Scottish cuisine. On the other hand, it recognised that there were weaknesses in terms of seasonality, low capacity utilisation, a low level of packaging of products and services, a lack of things to do in bad weather, and the poor presentation of some visitor attractions. Threats were also identified: they included, in particular, the inability to attract and retain a high quality workforce, as well as the lack of up-to-date maintenance of products, services and infrastructure, and the deterioration of parts of the natural environment in some popular areas.

VISION FOR 2020

My vision is for the improvement of our most precious asset - the environment, both for the benefit of people working in it and to place Scotland's environmental tourism in the world's top league.

What is this vision for the environment? First, the landscape will look different. We should see a noticeable recovery from the overuse and mismanagement of many decades. We should have more native tree cover on the lower ground and lower slopes, more scrub cover on the upper slopes, better planned and managed commercial forestry, fewer unsightly tracks in the wilder and remote areas, and agricultural land which is managed to provide more hedgerows and trees and more small woodlands.

We shall have a network of special places recognised for their environmental quality: "Scotland's Natural Wonders". We shall have international recognition of significant places because of the contribution they make to the landscape and biological diversity of the world: arctic/alpine areas, wetlands of blanket bogs and estuaries,

our astonishing underwater world, cultural landscapes of the machairs, run-rig systems, and upland seasonal agriculture. We shall have a Scottish network of areas with accolade status for their environmental quality - let's call them Sites of Conservation Importance. We shall have areas of which local communities are proud because of the contribution which they make to wildlife and landscape: Local Environment Areas maybe.

Infrastructure for Visitors

Infrastructure will be designed much more with the environment in mind, so that roads and their signage, accommodation, Tourist Information Centres and other buildings should match their natural setting. And make minimal demands on scarce natural resources for their maintenance and use. This will provide an interesting challenge for designers.

People will have freedom to go where they wish but within reasonable limits of the needs for privacy, of land management and of the ecological carrying capacity of the land. The responsible freedom and clear guidance through a Code of Practice should be set out in statute. And alongside this we shall have networks of strategic and local routes, "Paths for People", predominantly for walking but also for more specialist pursuits, such as cycling and horse riding.

This improved environment will require more people to be involved in its management, its enhancement where it has been degraded, and its re-creation where it has been lost. We should see a new basis of collaboration between people and environmental agencies for the "perpetual protection" of our environmental assets.

We shall have the sustainable use of natural resources in the best sense of that term, taking a "crop" now but ensuring that a crop can be taken again and again in the future. So we shall take crops from our soils and from our water to produce food and fibre for both residents and visitors alike.

We shall have more local people working productively in environmental tourism: managing the land, providing the services and looking after the infrastructure; and they will be properly trained and, where necessary, formally qualified and accredited. This will increase the local value added.

So our vision for environmental tourism in Scotland should be the recognition and effective use of environmental assets as a key resource for visitors: scenery, wildlife and local food from land and sea for visitors to enjoy. As a result I hope that we shall have a greater sense of awareness of the environment by all involved.

We shall have a higher level of tourism expenditure, not measured in mass tourism terms, but in terms of quality, as the level of visitor use must be in step with the carrying capacity of the environment, as well as with the communities and the infrastructure which is available.

We shall have a spread of tourism, geographically and seasonally, which will make the most responsible use of our environmental attractions, and not just the

'honeypot' areas - we want to spread the load more evenly to lesser known places which are as remarkable as places with a higher profile.

And finally, we should have a reduced environmental footprint through a more locally based approach in terms of the provision of labour, tourism products, visitor services and transport.

This is not a revolutionary vision: it is an evolutionary one, a realistic vision in which the environment becomes a core part of the industry and provides a key part of the marketing of 'Scotland the Brand'. As a result, Scotland will be in the top league globally in environmental tourism.

Achieving the Vision

We certainly have the assets. But do we have the will to achieve the vision?

To me the essential ingredients are: the assets, the markets, the infrastructure and the countryside information.

(1) Environment

Let us indulge ourselves by considering, for a moment, our great environmental assets. For example, the mountains and lochs of the West Highlands, the machairs of the Hebrides, the heather moorlands and glens of the Grampians - this is the Scotland which excites and enthuses the travel trade overseas and attracts visitors. However, the carrying capacity of our environment has diminished substantially over time, particularly in the Highlands. It is clear that the grazing of natural and semi-natural vegetation has a critical effect on the landscape character and the productiveness of the land: grazing levels are far too high in many areas and herbivores are often undermanaged. There are many complex reasons for this, not least the lack of market incentive and economic opportunity to do anything better and the detrimental effect of elements of the Common Agricultural Policy. Reducing the numbers of herbivores, particularly deer and sheep, and increasing the management of their beneficial grazing and manuring activity, and increasing the number of cattle would have a beneficial effect on our landscape and therefore on the natural heritage.

So what is the problem? It is one of attitude, mainly - we need dramatic changes in attitudes towards the management of land and in the financial instruments from European and Government sources. The thinking exists but only rarely do we see its practical translation.

We know a great deal already about the seasonal variation of our environment (spring green and autumn gold), and the major movements of wildlife within Scotland and between Scotland and the Tropics or the Arctic. But there is much more to exploit, in a way which does not damage the habitat or the wildlife which depends upon it. We need to look at the carrying capacity of particular species and sites. We should identify those areas where there need be no constraints whatsoever, some where there might be seasonal constraints, and others where there might be year

round constraints because of their inherent fragility - or in some cases, because there is a danger to human well-being.

And we don't even have to go to these places to know what is happening. We can show people the more vulnerable areas through closed circuit television and other forms of modern technology. And if we do, let us remember the telling request "take only pictures and make only footprints".

Let us remember that in twenty odd years or so we might have ownership of many precious areas by local communities and by charitable bodies serving a broader public purpose, such as the National Trust for Scotland. And also with SNH (or whatever it is called by then) owning land in the wider public interest.

We shall have greater appreciation of the geology and the landforms. Perhaps this is the most exciting story of all: that Scotland, in the very beginning, was attached to another continent in the Southern Hemisphere and gradually moved northwards, experiencing changing climates, breaking off from others and joining with England 400 million years ago, saying goodbye to North America 60 million years ago, having volcanoes like we experience in the Pacific Rim now, having icecaps and glaciers like we see in Iceland now. The remnants of all of these are there to be seen, along with many dynamic natural activities on mountain tops, on slopes, in river valleys and along the coast.

And we must not forget the nearer human history and how this is reflected in the landscape we see today.

In addition, we need to train environmental managers. The stalkers, gamekeepers, shepherds, farmers and crofters, should be trained and funded to play much wider roles, looking after the environment and tourists, as well as producing food and fibre. We need to get away from the notion that a farmer looking after the environment is a glorified "park keeper", to a recognition, backed up with hard cash to provide a decent standard of living, that caring for the environment is a worthwhile job in its own right. That way the opportunities available to them for exploiting the natural heritage will be sought out avidly.

(2) Markets

Market surveys tell us that visitors regard Scotland as a beautiful and largely unspoilt natural environment. We should therefore have targeted campaigns. The *Wild Scotland* brochure, produced jointly by STB and SNH, is an excellent start. Targeted campaigns exploiting our environmental assets, yet staying within their carrying capacity, have not yet begun in earnest. What about "bogs are beautiful", "seasonal invasions are stunning", "isles of eagles are entrancing", "alpine flower meadows are eye-catching" "machair meadows are magic", "undersea forests are fascinating", "undersea animals are dramatically colourful"? The stoop line is surely: "With all that on our doorstep why go to the Andes or to the Camargue or to Svalbard or to the Caribbean?" Targeted campaigns would recognise the diversity of this resource and its capacity to absorb increased tourism. I would particularly highlight our marine environment. It is only recently that an SNH survey has uncovered plants and animals which are as spectacular as anywhere in the world; but how many people

know about it and how many have access to this knowledge for pleasure and for deriving a reasonable income?

And what about walking? As visitor survey information makes clear, walking is a major activity of visitors to Scotland - and it is a major activity of local residents. A greater targeted effort on promoting where people with different capabilities and interests can go is surely needed.

(3) Infrastructure

A vision requires a sound infrastructure. As the STB assessment showed, our infrastructure is weak in places and also out of date. From the point of view of environmental tourism, a number of things need to be taken forward to achieve our 2020 vision. We need more access points to the countryside, but in locations which create neither environmental damage nor problems over privacy and land management for owners. We certainly need more paths, both the strategic paths across country and around our coasts, and the path networks near our settlements. We have made an extremely good start but work on paths is still under-resourced. We look for much greater input into this activity from Government and from the enterprise companies because of the potential economic benefits. We look for input from private funders who could gain brownie points from sponsoring such activities. And we look for the management and maintenance of the footpaths which exist and those which we shall be creating. This is a major headache for public authorities, like local authorities and SNH, and must be solved through setting up endowment funds helped by the private sector, through refocusing agri-environment funds, through some pump-priming support from Government and through support from the Lottery.

And we need ecologically sound accommodation. I applaud the Green Business Grading Scheme but I hope we can go beyond that to looking at the design and location of accommodation.

(4) Countryside Information

We also need to inform people better. The achievement of our vision will depend on sophisticated and effective communication. There is a need for better signing which looks well and fits into the environment. The clutter we have, for instance, along many roadsides detracts rather than helps. There are plenty of good examples we can learn from, particularly from the American and Canadian Rockies.

Surveys show that we need more guides and leaflets and better presented information. Every hotel room in the Highlands should have its pack which always tells us about the area and the natural environmental attractions there, and other information such as the Access Concordat and the hill phone systems. And what about local websites for visitors - available in the Tourist Information Centres and in accommodation?

I have a particular plea: we should not have a further proliferation of visitor centres. Yes, they are somewhere to go when the weather is bad, but for how long and for what benefit? Can we afford to maintain them all at a quality which our market twenty

years on will demand? I doubt it. We need to look for simpler facilities with lower construction and maintenance costs.

And we can encourage a new look to the environment by exploiting all of the creative arts media: painting, drawing, sketching, prose and poetry, music and photography in all of its guises. Our work in SNH with the Scottish Arts Council is just beginning to identify possibilities in this direction.

Conclusion

We need an integrated approach in our thinking, in our organisation, in our delivery. The Tourism and the Environment Task Force in its reinvigorated form can and should take the lead.

At an organisational level, the pettiness of defending territory must not be allowed to impede progress. Let's not look at the barriers between organisations but at the synergies between them. The local tourism agencies - ATBs and LECs have critical and shared roles to play.

Our approach must be planned, but its emphasis must be on action - action which stems from strategies which are owned by, and achieved by, partners. Capturing the importance of tourism in other plans - Community plans, rural development strategies, local Agenda 21 plans - is crucial. At the national level, we need an agreed plan shared by all the bodies which have a responsibility for economic development, the environment and tourism.

And we need financial support. A co-ordinated approach from Government perhaps by giving resources jointly to force joint working on tourism and environment initiatives.

And we need to encourage quality. We should be certifying our environmental tourism infrastructure and accrediting those who have reached, and continue to meet, required standards in their roles as environmental tourism managers and guides. The Cubans do it, why cannot we? And we should have codes of practice for environmental tourism, perhaps taking our lead from the French Regional Nature Parks in their imaginative approach of a Sustainable Tourism Charter.

We need a vision. I have tried to give some suggestions, but we also need both the will and the action collectively to achieve such a vision. Otherwise we shall continue merely to play at environmental tourism and miss the opportunities and benefits which are available to us. The prize is there. Let's make sure we go for it and achieve it.

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