

Report on Highland Biodiversity Forum

The Town House, Saturday 1st April 2006



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Introduction

The event attracted an audience of around 50 delegates from a wide range of public agencies, community organisations and representatives from LBAPs. A delegate list, with email addresses is attached at appendix 1.

Councillor Ian Ross opened proceedings with an overview of the achievements to date in relation to Biodiversity within the region. He also outlined the main aims of the day:

- To hear from each of the LBAP areas on their achievements and progress
- An update on the overall project from the Highland Biodiversity Officer
- Formally launch the Highland Biodiversity Partnership Agreement
- Participate in the workshop sessions in the afternoon.
- To take advantage of the networking opportunity and the chance to swap knowledge and experience.

Each of the LBAP areas then gave a short update on activity within their own areas.

Cairngorm

Stephen Corcoran outlined some of the major initiatives and projects which have are underway in the region. These include:

- *Swift Nest Survey*. This included the publication of a leaflet about Swifts and the erection of Swift nest boxes.
- *Butterfly and Moth project*. This particular project has been funded by Cairngorms National Park/SNH/Leader and will provide a Project Officer who will organise workshops and presentations. A key partner in the delivery of this project is BCS (Butterfly Conservation Scotland).
- *Dragonflies and Damselflies*. This project will involve the production of information leaflets and training events.
- *Amphibians*. Increased records on amphibians within the region and awareness raising events are the key outcomes of this initiative.
- *Biodiversity Grant Scheme*. This scheme can provide 100% grants of up to £5000. These are available to any non profit making, constituted organisation and funding can be used for pond creation, hide construction, recording equipment, village biodiversity audits. It is hoped that in 2006/7 additional funding will be available and there may be scope to increase the value of grant awards.
- *Water Vole Conservation*. Laura Taylor has been appointed to this post and key activities include Mink control and habitat creation. This is part of a larger project in conjunction with Aberdeen University.
- *Aspen Nursery*. This project will help to increase the propagation of native stock in a nursery and provide a guide on native aspen.
- *Non-native Fish*. This leaflet highlights the non-native species and is linked into non-native plant life.

In addition to the initiatives outlined above the group also work closely with the Cairngorm National Park Authority and have contributed to some of their initiatives and projects. These include:

- North East Scotland Biological Records Centre
- Partnership for action against Wildlife Crime
- Fresh water Pearl Mussels

- Biodiversity Planning Guidance – Note for the House Builder.

Caithness

David Glass gave an outline of the activity and initiatives in operation in the Caithness region. These include:

- *Administration and Organisation.* Regular meetings held. Discussion on constitution and whether to open bank account. They feel have spent a lot of time on this element and now need to concentrate on projects.
- *Habitat enhancement.* Propagation of Kidney Vetch for butterflies.
- *Barn Owl Boxes.* Barn owls now becoming more common and group have 12 boxes up locally.
- *Wetland Habitat at John o' Groats.* Working to restore a wetland habitat where water levels had dropped.
- *Sand Martin barrels.* Erection of barrels to encourage greater numbers of sand martins.
- *Water Vole Survey.* Objective was to get baseline distribution data in advance of the possible spread of mink to Caithness. 34 sites were surveyed and 56% had water vole present.

Projects for the current year

- Lichen Training Event
- Mammal Event – voles and shrews
- Construct a new wetland habitat at Dunnet (in conjunction with Dunnet Forest Trust).

Lochaber

Lorna Anness gave an outline of the activity within the Lochaber region. These include:

- *Clunes Forest.* Utilising unused sheds the group are running workshops delivered by local experts.
- *High School Project.* Work with special needs group on a weekly basis and have been running workshops on lichens and mosses.
- *Montane Willow.* Working with Forestry Commission and bringing in local residents to train as recorders.
- *Freshwater Invertebrates.* Surveys and workshops being undertaken throughout Lochaber. Data being provided to HBRG (Highland Biological Recording Group).

Skye

Unfortunately no representative from the Skye group was able to attend, however Jonathan Willet provided an update on Skye activity.

Skye and Lochalsh LBAP launched in December 2003 and did not really develop further until it was reformed in January 2005. The reforming of the group was in response to two key drivers, how to spend the £10k of Highland Biodiversity Partnership Implementation Funding and a request from the Environment Forum to ensure remit wider than just taking forward LBAP activity and to ensure communication with community, agencies and NGO's etc.

The four key projects selected for funding were:

- *Marine Awareness Raising Event.*
- *Biodiversity Trail Leaflet for Skye and Lochalsh*
- *Black Throated Diver rafts in Lochalsh*
- *Biodiversity of Buildings Survey.* This will survey the use of buildings locally by Swallows, bats and Barn Owls etc. The results will then be used to ensure that existing habitats are not lost and any potential improvements suggested to property owners.

The new group is currently drafting a new constitution and will become the Skye and Lochalsh Environmental Forum. The next priority is to produce a 'SMART' summary for the LBAP and come up with projects/targets that are achievable.

Wester Ross (WREN – Wester Ross Environmental Network)

Group are supported by a loyal, varied and innovative group of volunteers. Key projects being undertaken include:

- *Biodiversity of River Carron.* This has included re-stocking with salmon and sea trout and undertaking an audit to identify the benefits to other species. This work is being undertaken with a volunteer graduate from Napier University.
- *Wester Ross Marine Reserve Partnership.* This project has included the utilisation of a ROV which beamed images to a big screen and provided a unique opportunity for the community to view the images. In addition nature walks have been established and ponds and paths installed.

Other small projects have been supported and have been effectively managed by the applicant. An example of this is an art competition for children which has attracted over 150 entries. The winning entry will be adopted as the WREN logo.

Easter Ross

Martin Hind spoke for the Easter Ross LBAP and outlined the progress with their major Cornfields project. This talk was illustrated with impressive images of the cornfields in full bloom and some of the species which are benefiting from the project.

Key points from this project are:

- 10 participants (9 farms and one primary school).
- Key requirement of sites were they needed to be close to busy routes to maximise impact and raise awareness.
- Create a visual impact.
- Good advert for farmers involved in conservation (this is not always obvious).
- Benefit invertebrates and farm birds, including partridge.
- Sites managed differently after seeding to assess impact
- Insect surveys were undertaken
- RSPB surveyed wintering birds and observed some interesting results.
- Installation of boxes for Barn Owls and Tree Sparrows where appropriate.

In addition to the Cornfields project the group have also been involved in the creation of additional pond sites and salmon beds at Dunglass Islands, Brahan Estate, Maryburgh.

Inverness

Bill Forrest from PRIN (Partnership for Rural Inverness and Nairn) outlined the current activity within this group. Twelve biodiversity projects have been assisted via PRIN and 4 of these received support from the Highland Biodiversity Projects. These included:

- *Nature of Loch Ness.*
- *City Wildlife leaflet*
- *BEN (Boleskine Environmental Network) Interpretive Boards*
- *Biodiversity leaflet*
- *Survey in Nairnshire – Invasive Species*
- *Glenurquhart Wildlife Garden*
- *A year in the life of Loch Bran*
- *Abriachan Black Grouse Bogs*
- *Beauly Medieval Garden*
- *JAPES (Junior Ardersier and Petty Environmental Society) Vegetable Garden*
- *Kirkhill Bio Play Area – wicker structures*
- *BTCV (British Trust for Conservation Volunteers) Merkinch Dry Stone Wall.*

A key observation from this group is the need to engage with communities, build capacity and maximise the funding opportunities available.

Councillor Ross thanked all of the speakers for their fascinating and interesting presentations and said that it highlighted the wide range and diversity of projects which were being undertaken in each area and that there numerous opportunities to learn from each other and transfer knowledge and experience. He then introduced Jonathan Willet, The Highland Biodiversity Officer who had been recruited to job share with Janet Bronham who was presently on maternity leave.

Highland Biodiversity Project - Update

Jonathan gave a summary of what has been happening during 2005/6. Activity has included:

1. Delivery of locally based projects as described earlier by each area.
2. Pan-Highland Projects – which include:
 - Cornflower Project
 - Highland Bumblebee Atlas
 - Red Squirrel Project
 - Highland Environmental Network Conference
 - Spider ID Workshop
 - Swift Survey
3. Work is also underway to produce the Cairngorms Partner Project Delivery Plan

This aims to maximise the benefits to biodiversity through existing service delivery of Highland Council Departments and Officers within the Cairngorms National Park. After a series of meetings, final plans will be submitted to the Badenoch and

Strathspey local committee for approval. After this their delivery will be monitored annually by the Biodiversity Officers and in due course the project will be rolled out across the entire Highland Council area.

4. Current activity is centred on the Highland Biodiversity Review – this has 3 key elements:

- Local Review
- Production of a Strategic Highland BAP
- Database of the UK Priority Species and Habitats found in the Highlands and Islands

This exercise is due to be completed by August 2006.

5. Activity for the remainder of 2006/7 includes:

- Gather a baseline of data for what action has been happening for species and habitats in Highland in the last 10 years.
- Encouraging the Council to think 'Green'.
- Providing support to Local Partnerships.
- Securing future implementation funding.

6. For the Future:

- Assess the needs and recommendations from the Highland Biodiversity Review.
- Ensure funding for implementation of the recommendations.
- Keep up the momentum already developed in the local areas and encourage partnership working.
- The future is looking good!

Councillor Ross thanked Jonathan for the work and effort on the project so far and also mentioned that presently he is job sharing with Jennie Abell who is covering for Janet whilst she is on maternity leave.

A short questions session then followed and a summary of these is given below:

Bill Forrest PRIN highlighted the need to ensure that there was a need to engage with youngsters and the best way to do this was at an early age and that one way of doing this was via Eleanor Gordon, the Sustainable Education Officer for the region. He also highlighted the need for a co-ordinated approach throughout Scotland and that currently there was a lack of communication.

Bill also highlighted the achievements of Fortrose Academy as an Eco School and that it had now developed international links and that a key way forward here was for a school champion to take initiatives like these forward.

An issue over the cost of Public Liability Insurance was also raised as a number of groups had found this to be difficult and expensive. Advice was that BTCV in Munloch can help and advise on this and if working with volunteers, so long as they are registered with Volunteering Highland they will already be covered by their policy.

The issue of soil biodiversity was also raised as it was felt that this was an area that is often forgotten about, though it is a crucial element of habitat management.

Opportunities to link in with Forest Enterprise and Soil Association research were identified.

Highland Biodiversity Partnership Agreement

Councillor Ross then formally launched the Highland Biodiversity Partnership Agreement.

The text of the agreement and a list of its signatories are attached at appendix 2.

Proceedings then broke for lunch and it was agreed to amend the programme slightly and instead of going for a walk around the Ness Islands immediately after lunch that this option would be left till the end of the afternoon. This would enable the workshops to be brought forward an hour and allow the event to conclude earlier.

Workshop Sessions

Those attending the Forum were split into three groups. Both groups tackled two workshops. These were;

1. Identification of blockages to delivering local biodiversity actions.
2. How best can we deliver the Strategic Highland Biodiversity Action Plan? How ambitious should we be?

Feedback from each workshop was as follows:

Workshop 1

- Lack of resources and joined up thinking relating to the collecting, accessing and disseminating of Highland's biodiversity data. (This was the key local issue identified by all the groups).
- Local delivery often lacked resources (funding and volunteer time), know-how, awareness in the community of what was being done.
- Support needs to be top down.
- The need for knowledge of the geographical location of targeted species
- Needs more community engagement events
- Involve youngsters and instil biodiversity awareness at an early age.
- Practical help/advice with the 'operation of local groups.
- Succession planning within groups – membership often changes
- Not knowing who can do what or has particular expertise

Workshop 2

- Have a 10 year vision.
- Need secure funding and resources to deliver the actions.
- Empowering and involving the local community will achieve best results.
- Build on the already well established partnership working approach with agencies and LBAP's.
- Greater links with Planning officials to ensure habitats and species are taken into account during construction projects (large and small).
- Develop an integrated local records centre for the region.
- Strategy needed to control invasive species and monitor spread.

- Encourage integrated land management at local level and contractor level.

Summing Up and Conclusions

Councillor Ross thanked everyone for attending and participating in the proceedings and highlighted that it was clear there were still difficulties and challenges ahead to protect the rich and varied biodiversity within the region. However, from the earlier sessions it was clear that significant progress was being made and those involved should be pleased with their achievements to date. In total some 40 local projects were now underway or complete in the whole Highland region.

A number of challenges were ahead, including:

- Securing future implementation funding
- Addressing key strategic areas identified in the soon to be produced review
- Keeping the existing momentum going

A key challenge was to ensure that 'biodiversity becomes mainstream' and integrated into all our daily activities.

Councillor Ross closed with thanks to Ian Burnett and his staff for their hospitality in the Town House and the Museum Coffee Shop for the catering.

Delegates were also reminded to complete their evaluation sheets to ensure that feedback can be taken into account for future events. The results of these can be found at Appendix 3.

Appendix 1.

Delegate List

Lorna	Anness	Lochaber Biodiversity Group	lorna_anness@hotmail.com
Moira	Baptie	Forest Enterprise	moira.baptie@forestry.gsi.gov.uk
Margaret	Barron	Inverness Botany Group	
Adele	Beck	Forestry Commission	adele.beck@forestry.gsi.gov.uk
Janet	Bromham	The Highland Council	janet.bromham@highland.gov.uk
John	Bryden	Northern Constabulary	john.bryden@northern.pnn.police.co.uk
Karen	Clarke		106300.3114@compuserve.com
Stephen	Corcoran	Cairngorms Biodiversity Officer	stephencorcoran@cairngorms.co.uk
Peter	Cunningham	Wester Ross Fisheries Trust	info@wrft.org.uk
Calum	Duncan	Marine Conservation Society	scotland@mcsuk.org
Tanya	Fletcher	BTCV Scotland	t.fletcher@btcv.org.uk
Aaron	Forsyth	Wester Ross Environmental Network	aaron@scoraig.com
David	Glass	Caithness Biodiversity Group	david.glass@fsmail.net
Douglas	Halliday	John Muir Trust	douglas@jmt.org
Lloyd	Gudgeon	Wester Ross Alliance	Lloyd.gudgeon@highland.gov.uk
George	Hamilton	The Highland Council	george.hamilton@highland.gov.uk
Martin	Hind	Easter Ross Biodiversity Group	
Allan	Hodgson	Scottish Gamekeepers Association	dalmigarry@cali.co.uk
Elaine	Hodgson	Dalmigarry Estates	dalmigarry@cali.co.uk
Lesley	Kilbride	Croft Wools	lesleykilbride@yahoo.com
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		Broadford and Strath Landscape Partnership	
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Ro	Scott	SNH	ro.scott@snh.gov.uk
Jenny	Sleeman	BTCV Scotland	j.sleeman@btcv.org.uk
Graeme	Smith	HC Councillor	graeme.smith.cllr@highland.gov.uk
Dominic	Steele	Lifescan	dsteele@lfsqb.inj.com
Bill	Taylor	HIE	bill.taylor@hient.co.uk
Peter	Tillbrook	SWT & Moray Firth Partnership	tillbrook@cali.co.uk
Richard	Wallace	FCS	Richard.wallace@forestry.gsi.gov.uk
Christine	Welsh	SNH	christine.welsh@snh.gov.uk
Jonathan	Willet	The Highland Council	jonathan.willet@highland.gov.uk
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Highland Biodiversity Partnership Agreement

Introduction

The Highland Biodiversity Partnership comprises 20 - 30 representatives from local groups and key organisations committed to understanding, safeguarding, restoring and celebrating biodiversity within the Highland Council area. Its purpose is 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.

Our Aims

The aims of the Highland Biodiversity Partnership are:

- To identify and address strategic and / or pan-Highland biodiversity issues.
- To review and monitor biodiversity actions contained within the seven Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs), with reference to the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Implementation Plans.
- To provide a link between local groups and national biodiversity strategies, action plans and reporting procedures.
- To raise awareness and promote biodiversity by championing individual LBAPs and biodiversity issues generally.

Our Commitment

In recognition of the above, we the undersigned pledge our co-operation, commitment and support to the Highland Biodiversity Partnership and undertake to use our best endeavours to:

- Take cognisance of the Highland LBAPs in the day-to-day business of our organisations.
- Identify sources of funding to deliver an improved Highland Biodiversity Network, provide support to local groups and finance future grant schemes.
- Produce a Highland Biodiversity Action Plan identifying the key strategic actions emerging from the 8 Highland LBAPs and for each action; identify a 'SMART target that can be delivered in the next three years.
- Provide guidance and support to local biodiversity groups and help them produce an Implementation Plan that, building on their LBAP, identifies who will undertake which actions and when.
- Monitor and report on progress with the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan and constituent LBAPs at local, regional and national levels.

Governance

The Partnership will operate on the following principles:

- **Legal Status:** The Partnership itself will hold no legal status, but in signing this Agreement members agree to work together to deliver the Highland LBAPs and address individual biodiversity issues as they arise.
- **Membership:** Meetings will be open to Partnership members and members have the ability to introduce new members as deemed appropriate. Co-opted representatives may be invited to attend to discuss specific items of business.
- **Meetings:** The Partnership will meet on an infrequent basis – i.e. once or twice per annum, although further meetings may be required at the outset and from time to time to deal with large issues.

- Sub Group: A Sub Group comprising 6 - 8 Partnership members will meet more frequently to undertake agreed tasks and report back to the wider membership.
- Project Management: The Sub Group will put in place separate arrangements for funding and managing any individual projects under the auspices of the Highland Biodiversity Partnership as appropriate.
- Working Groups: The Partnership will convene smaller Working Groups as necessary to address specific issues arising from the Highland LBAPs.
- Chair: Initial meetings will be chaired by Cllr Ian Ross, Chairman of Highland Councils Sustainable Development Select Committee. Once the Partnership is established, members will elect a new Chair from amongst their number, rotating on a three year basis or as otherwise agreed.
- Administration: The Partnership will be serviced by the Councils Biodiversity Officers.
- Budget: Unless otherwise agreed, the Council will hold and manage any associated budget and finances.
- Voting: Every effort will be made to reach decisions by consensus but where a vote must be taken; the minimum number of members required at meetings is 15.
- Reporting: The Partnership will report regularly to the Highland Wellbeing Alliance, Sustainable Development Select Committee and other Groups and Forums as deemed appropriate by members.
- Relationship to other Groups: The Partnership will promote new and existing relationships with other groups and fora operating in the biodiversity arena.
- Badenoch & Strathspey: The Partnership will liaise with the Cairngorms Biodiversity Steering Group over relevant issues and projects in Badenoch & Strathspey.
- Highland Biodiversity Forum: The Partnership will set up and manage a Forum of stakeholders and local enthusiasts, which will be open to anyone with an interest in biodiversity to join.
- Annual Seminar: An annual seminar will be held to listen to views from, and report on progress to, members of the Highland Biodiversity Forum.
- Publicity: The Partnership will publicise progress updates twice a year through a newsletter and the website www.highlandbiodiversity.com.
- Acknowledgements: The Partners agree that in conducting the Partnership and in publicising its work, full recognition will be given to the support of each Partner.
- Termination: Any member will be entitled to withdraw from the Partnership on giving one month written notice to its Chair.

Signatories

Cairngorms Biodiversity Partnership	Royal Society for the Protection for Birds
Caithness Biodiversity Group	Scottish Agricultural College
Community Woodlands Association	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
Ross and Cromarty (East) Biodiversity Group	Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department
Deer Commission Scotland	Scottish Natural Heritage
Inverness and Nairn Biodiversity Group	Scottish Rural Property and Business Association
Forestry Commission Scotland	Scottish Wildlife Trust
Highland Biological Recording Group	Skye and Lochalsh Biodiversity Group
Highland Council	Sutherland Biodiversity Group
Highlands and Islands Enterprise	The Crown Estate
Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group	Wester Ross Environment Network

Feedback from Evaluation Forms

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Presentations	53%	47%		
Venue	60%	40%		
Catering	33%	26%	40%	

The following topics/activities were also suggested for future events:

- Outcome of the Strategic Review
- 10 Year vision
- Non native invasive species
- Biological recording
- Soil
- Field/site visits to actually see projects and talk to those involved
- Biodiversity roadshow for the region – convert a double-decker bus and tour the region
- Recording methodology