

The oceanic edge of Europe: Ecotourism in the Outer Hebrides

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To a large extent, the case could be made that tourism in the Outer Hebrides has always been primarily about ecotourism, in the broad interpretation of this term. Tourists have always been attracted by the *difference* of the natural environment in the islands, (and in more recent decades, also by an interest in the distinctive Gaelic culture and heritage of the inhabitants). Stretched along the north-western oceanic edge of Europe, the islands of the Outer Hebrides form a chain of over 100 islands, 14 of them inhabited. Geologically, the islands consist mainly of Precambrian Lewisian Gneiss, hard, contorted, resistant, and the oldest rock formation in the British Isles (McKirdy, 2018). From a geographical perspective, this is a drowned landscape (ria scenery) with the islands protruding above sea-level in a long, continuous chain (an old name for the Outer Hebrides is “the Long Island”). In many parts of the islands the impervious rock and its blanket of deep peat results in countless small bodies of water which seem to ensure more water than land (McKirdy, Gordon, & Crofts, 2007). The relative distance of the islands from the major population centres of Europe have helped to protect extensive areas of natural habitats from destruction, and the wildlife that inhabits here includes many species which are rare, uncommon, or entirely absent in most of the rest of the country. The climate is a mixture of the humid Atlantic weather systems and the drier influences carried from the continental landmass of mainland Europe, so the local weather generally avoids temperature extremes, but is fairly variable throughout the year (Manley, 1979). Most years’ experience only one or two days of snow lying (so winter sports are not really a key feature of the regional economy) with mild winters and warm summers which are rarely very hot (so there is little incentive for tourists to lie in rows on the huge island beaches). Instead, even the earliest visitors, from Neolithic times (around 4000 BC) onwards, were more concerned with experiencing the great outdoors, the natural environment, and the distinctive Gaelic culture of these islands.

At its simplest and most historical, after St. Columba arrived in the Isle of Iona in 563 AD to establish his monastic settlement, there followed a spread of early Christian visitors all along the Atlantic coastlines of Ireland, Scotland, and Scandinavia. They were seeking to escape the cares of the social world through isolation from human temptations and deep communion with the natural environment. These early monks (and some nuns) deliberately chose to locate their living cells and their small stone-built chapels on the rugged coasts and the small offshore islands straggled all along the length of the Hebrides. Their self-imposed distance from human society was a strong part of their religious beliefs, but so too was their desire to celebrate the beauty of the natural world, their association with the wildlife, and their desire to adopt a simple lifestyle which was harmonious with nature. The wild winter storms and the long bright nights of summer were equally worth celebrating in their theism. They found the wonder of their god in their experiences with the

wildlife, the huge seabird colonies, basking sharks and leaping cetaceans, which this fresh “unspoiled” landscape supported (Marsden, 1995).

Closely related to this form of worship came the visitors to the ancient healing wells. Many, if not most, of these natural springs scattered throughout the Outer Hebrides had been identified and celebrated long before the arrival of Christianity, but with a pragmatic diplomacy the new religion absorbed the earlier pagan customs and embedded them in their own brand of Roman Catholic worship. Visitors, both local and from hundreds of miles distant, would come in hope that the pure waters of the wells would cure their illnesses – including jaundice, toothache, rheumatism, even mental conditions – and a string of “healing wells” can still be found throughout the Outer Hebrides (MacLeod, 2018). There is a long tradition of a very pervasive belief that living in close proximity with nature, even for a short visit, is cleansing and refreshes the human body, and these outer islands offered plenty opportunities for that sense of intimacy with the natural environment, with few of the distractions of the more populous urban areas. Although the practice of celebration at these healing wells declined from pagan worship to Roman Catholic observance, and was later still discouraged and largely abandoned after the Reformation to Protestant Presbyterianism, to many contemporary visitors they still symbolise something of the purity of the Hebridean natural environment and its ability to influence their spiritual health (MacIntosh, 2018).

The next noteworthy appearances among the early visitors (at least those who left documented evidence of their experiences as tourists) were the eighteenth century “gentlemen travellers” who regarded the challenge of travel to locations far outwith their usual habitat as part of their thrill. In a similar manner to contemporary tourists who seek the thrill of “extreme sports”, these early tourists sought the contrasts between their metropolitan lives and cultures and the rugged landscapes and strange customs of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Foremost among these traveling visitors was Martin Martin, a native Gaelic speaker from the Isle of Skye who in 1697 visited the island of Hiort in the St Kilda archipelago (now a double UNESCO World Heritage Site for valued for both its environmental and cultural qualities). St Kilda is difficult to visit even today, and the expedition by Martin Martin was greeted by his UK readers much in the same way that we would nowadays be entranced by our next-door neighbour returning with tales of walking through the jungle in Papua New Guinea, or canoeing down the Amazon. Martin Martin also later made an extensive tour of many of the Hebridean islands and published his observations in an acclaimed book *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* in 1703 (which is particularly valued for his second edition in 1716) (Martin, 1981). It is generally thought that Martin Martin, being an islander himself, owed much of the richness of his experiences to the fact that he had local connections, and that he could converse in the indigenous language of the islands. His books describing the places and landscapes that he journeys through were popularly received at the time, and did a great deal to encourage others to take an interest in this environment.

The English writer Dr Samuel Johnson, whose chief claim to historical recognition is as the editor of a celebrated dictionary of the English language, also made a tour of the west Highlands and Islands sixty years later, in 1775, accompanied by his friend (and later biographer) James Boswell. Johnson and Boswell had read Martin’s books of travel in the Hebrides, and of course Johnson subsequently wrote his own account of his travels - *A journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) – but Johnson was critical of Martin as being a credulous and unreliable reporter, who failed to document the most interesting aspects of his encounters. Johnson suggested that this failure was

largely because, being 'native' Martin did not fully appreciate how different what he saw was in comparison with other places. To set the record straight, however, it should be noted that Martin travelled much more extensively in the Highlands and Islands than Johnson and Boswell ever achieved, and in addition he had studied at Edinburgh University, and subsequently at the University of Leiden (where he graduated with an MD) and later still at the University in Trier. Dr Johnson, on the other hand, had never been out of England at this time (in fact, he spent most of his life within London itself) and being monolingual in English only, he was unable to converse with any of the locals in their own language (and at this period, most of the ordinary people spoke only Gaelic). Martin was at home in this environment, and understood it in a way that Dr Johnson never could.

The timing of Dr Johnson's travel is significant, however, because at this time the political situation in the UK was undergoing a period of rapid and dramatic change. With the collapse of the Jacobite rising in 1715 there was an increased interest in the Highlands and Islands, primarily, it has to be said, in order to gain intelligence in order to circumvent any future political discontent. This intelligence included not only knowledge about who was well-disposed towards the new Hanoverian monarchy (and who was not) but also the bare facts of the geography of this little-documented region. What did it look like? How did an army get from A to B and what environment and landscape would it encounter? Environmental interest was not about aesthetics, not about appreciating wildlife or scenery, but very practically based on preparing to any potential military activity. There were several expeditions tasked to make accurate maps of the region, and to construct new roads to enable troops to march north quickly in the event of any possible disturbances (MacLeod, 1989). (At the start of the 1745 rising, the Jacobite army used these same roads to advance rapidly southwards on the capital cities). Underlying all of these journeys by visitors to the region was a fascination with the natural environment.

In most cases those early visitors found the landscape (and the culture of the local inhabitants) disturbingly different from what they had been familiar with in their own place of residence (Bray, 1996). Dr Johnson, was captivated by the scenery, but he found it appalling, gloomy, and hostile and at this time many other visitors thought like him. Despite this, the tourists, for that is what we can now call them, appear to have felt that it was worth the discomfort and the inconvenience of the expedition in order simply to experience this landscape. Essentially this new type of visitor had come to visit as a primitive eco-tourist – not necessarily enjoying the land for its own sake, but primarily in order to impress people back home in their London coffee houses and gentlemen's clubs with their outlandish tales of adventure and show what a daring fellow they had been. Slowly, as the 18th century progressed, there grew an almost reluctant awareness of the beauty of the stunning scenery and the natural environment of the Highlands and Islands. As this understanding of the beauty of "nature" became more socially acceptable, it sparked the recognition of a sort of "green consciousness" in the public at large, and this in turn encouraged more visitors (Smut, 2011). The landscape became something to be appreciated, rather than simply a supplier of basic commodities, such as timber, minerals, and farmed produce. Of the six prints watercolour paintings of the Outer Hebrides which the acclaimed artist William Daniell published in his multi-volume record of his tour all around the coast of Britain in the early 1800's (Daniell, 2006) four images were of archaeological views and two depicted the enormous columnar basalt cliffs of the Shiant Isles. The natural environment of the Highlands and Islands had become something to admire and

praise.

The Outer Hebrides were still hard to get to, but it appeared that the extra effort required heightened their desirability and became part of the added challenge. It is no accident that the earliest arrivals of the modern eco-tourists were members of the yachting fraternity to whom the sea-lochs, bays and narrows of the Outer Hebridean coastline were the main reason for coming here. Over time, this marine ecotourist interest has evolved to include divers, surfers, whale-watchers, and families on pleasure cruises around the wildlife havens of the hard-to-reach cliffs and smaller offshore islands. The weekly summertime arrival of gigantic cruise liners which anchor in the deeper water near the entrance of the sheltered harbour of Steòrnabhagh and ferry their passengers ashore to sightsee, is only the most recent iteration of this form of sea-going visitor activity.

Not until the middle of the 20th century did the concept really become accepted that people might actually pay money in order to be able to appreciate the beauties of landscape, or that attracting tourists who might come in order to enjoy the natural environment, might actually create employment in rural areas where other forms of employment were difficult to sustain.

In 1811, the landowner of Lewis and Harris, the 11th Earl of Seaforth, is said to have introduced the crofting system of land management to the island. By this it is meant that under his instructions, the land which had previously been regarded as the common property of the clan (the extended family) was now divided up, and small areas of agriculturally poor land (crofts) were then rented to island families who depended on the produce of the land for their subsistence (Hunter, 1976). The average croft is small (even today the typical size of a croft in the Outer Hebrides is about 2 hectares) and they were deliberately created small with the intention that the crofters would be available to engage in other economic activity, such as fishing, weaving, or working for the landlord. Crofts were intended to provide a house site, some land to provide food for the family, but intentionally too small to provide a full-time income for the crofter. Over time, this initial disadvantage has become a great asset of the crofting system, for it has brought three main benefits. Firstly, tenancy of a piece of land has enabled crofters (and their offspring) to build their own houses, and so has retained a population level that many other non-crofting parts of the Highlands and Islands have been unable to sustain. Secondly, the inability to earn a living solely from the agriculture of a croft has resulted in crofters diversifying their employment (usually as their main jobs) into a very wide range of vocations. Thirdly – and this is particularly important in the consideration of ecotourism – the combination of small fields on many small, individually-worked crofts, together with the adjacent moorland and sandy coastal grassland (called 'machair') has resulted in an extraordinary rich patchwork of habitats which encourages biodiversity (Rennie, 1997). Unlike larger commercial farms in much of the mainland of the UK, this habitat diversity provides food and shelter for many different wildlife species, some of which are now rare or extinct in most of the rest of the country. Tourists now come to the Outer Hebridean islands not simply to admire the unique land management system of the croftland, but to actively seek the wildlife which these habitats support, birds such as the Corncrake, (*Crex crex*), large flocks of wading birds nesting on the machair, or Bumblebees which are now no longer found on mainland farms.

There are many other wildlife species in the Outer Hebrides which are uncommon elsewhere, including the Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) the European Otter (*Lutra lutra*), the Golden Eagle

(*Aquila chrysaetos*) and the re-introduced White-tailed Sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) (Love, 1983) as well as a dazzling variety of native flowers including species of Orchids found only in the Hebrides. These species tend to attract a particular type of tourist – middle-aged, well-educated, and well-off – who are the new generation of ecotourists coming to these islands. After several decades of persecution by non-native European Mink (*Mustela vison*) which had spread through the islands, the operators of marine tour-boats are already reporting seabirds such as Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisea*) and other ground-nesting birds like waders, appear to be returning to full breeding strengths. This is crucially important, for the Outer Hebridean islands are the breeding grounds for huge numbers of wading birds (on the lime-rich machair grasslands of the Uists) and spectacular assemblages of seabird “cities” on the steep coastal cliffs of the western coasts.

On the opening page of his classic and groundbreaking account of living among wild nature on a small island, “*A Naturalist on Rona*”, (subtitled “*Essays of a biologist in isolation*”) Frank Fraser Darling wrote:

“We speak sometimes of barren coasts because our mind is apt to think in terms of soil and foliage, but they are hardly ever that. To the seeing eye the stark cliffs of the north are as rich and vivid in their own way as that natural fairyland of the pools on the Great Barrier Reef of Australia.” (Darling, 1939)

It would be wrong, however, to assume that even environmentally friendly tourism is unquestioningly welcomed. There are periodic discussions about increasing the capacity of the ferry services to the islands to enable a greater number of visitors, but at the height of the summer, large events such as the Hebridean Celtic Music Festival mean that rented accommodation can be very difficult to get throughout Lewis and Harris. The resident population of the Outer Hebrides is currently around 28,000 people, and there are more than 218,000 visitors per year. On any island, there is a limit to the capacity to absorb extra people, and of course tourists seeking the environmental attractions tend to want to come during the summer months, producing a peak during the months of June, July, and August, but trailing away during much of the rest of the year. This can produce some difficulties which are common to tourist localities across the world, such as travel frustrations for locals and the complications of careless rubbish disposal or disorganised, wild camping in inappropriate places. The recent growth in tourist motorhomes is greeted with mixed feelings, for their drivers often attempt to navigate small roads not designed for such large vehicles, their occupants do not require overnight accommodation, and they frequently bring both their own food and the fuel for their vehicles from the mainland, contributing little or no spending in the local economy.

These issues are not unique to the Outer Hebrides, of course, and neither are they unsolvable, but there is currently an active debate about to what extent, and in what manner, can future tourism activities contribute positively to the island communities while simultaneously minimising the disbenefits.

For a region which has strong assets in the natural environment and the social culture of its communities, there is a fine dividing line between welcoming ecotourists to learning about your environment, and damaging that environment with requiring to manage too many visitors. So far, this is not a major concern in the Outer Hebrides, but some locals can point to a small village where the AirBnB and holiday homes outnumber the homes of permanent residents. They make the

comparison with places like the city of Venice where local people have moved out and seasonal tourists dominate the accommodation, and they worry.

Tourism can be a very superficial experience, even among people who do not primarily have a materialistic drive. There is a voyeuristic element, which likes to observe what is going on, to see what is around the next bend in the road, to experience, even for a little while, the sense of something exotic, new, different. This has an inherent contradiction for ecotourism development - visitors like to see “the sights”, but if those sights are only of beautiful scenery, the sights are free, so who pays for the maintenance and the tourism services? If those sights include rare or iconic wildlife species, how do we make certain that the pressure of observers does not threaten those species? These are the issues which face many rural communities which have important natural environment attractions but a low density of human population. These are the challenges and opportunities facing the Outer Hebrides in the 21st century. There are regular but intermittent sightings of rare birds in the Outer Hebrides, such as the time that a Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) appeared, blown off-course from beyond the Russian Urals, or the year a Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) arrived, more commonly seen in Africa or the Middle East. These sightings can bring sudden hordes of that unusual ecotourist, the “twitcher” - the obsessive birdwatcher who is driven to “tick-off” sightings of new bird species on their personal list. They arrived and they went away again, more quickly than the rarities that they came to see. There is a new realisation, however, that the natural environment of the Outer Hebrides is perhaps another means of improving rural development in the islands (Rennie, 1998). Conventionally “development” and “environmental conservation” were seen as opposing elements of a strategy for utilising the countryside, but with the growing awareness that some people are prepared to *pay* good money for a wildlife experience, opinions are shifting. Catering to the needs of the “ecotourist” is now a potential economic growth sector. In one Hebridean island, it is reliably estimated that the income derived from the people coming specifically to observe the White-tailed Sea Eagle is well into seven figures per year, and there are very few other trade sectors in the region that can talk about their gross income in terms of millions of pounds per annum.

Parallel to these changing attitudes to nature conservation, and not totally unrelated to them, is the rise of a phenomenal initiative of local empowerment based upon land reform in Scotland. Since 1999, following a popular public campaign, the Scottish Parliament bought out new laws in Scotland which were aimed to encourage community ownership of land and other assets by the local resident communities. The impacts of this have been very significant and have been discussed elsewhere (Rennie and Billing, 2015; Bryden and Geisler, 2007) the details of which are not directly relevant here. What is significant, however, is the fact that large areas of land, in the Outer Hebrides and elsewhere in Scotland, are now owned and managed directly by locally elected residents. In the Outer Hebrides it is estimated that 75% of the land and 85% of the population are now on community owned land. In effect, the local community elects a Board of Trustees of a social enterprise company, whose task it is to manage the land and its assets for the general benefit of the local community. This shift from private ownership of land to community ownership is more than just semantics, for the new Land Trusts can have fundamentally different objectives than a private company created to maximise individual financial gain. The adherence to social, environmental, as well as economic objectives means that local Land Trusts, managed by local people, have a different and longer-term perception of what “sustainable development” actually means.

There are solid emotional, social, and heritage attractions to the sense of “belonging to the land” as well as good economic and political reasons. The holistic combination of these attachments to the land has the effect of discouraging quick-fix solutions and favouring long-term sustainability and community resilience (Skerratt, 2013). For these reasons, several Community Land Trusts in Lewis and Harris, for example, have targeted the creation of local opportunities in environmental conservation; one Trust employs a Countryside Ranger to guide ecotourists around their land and provide nature information for guests, another Trust manages a local nature reserve on their land which is important for migrating birds and is a favourite spot for birdwatchers. Several of the Trusts have given environmental tourism developments high priority in their business plans, including the provision of assistance with visitor accommodation, campsites, and eco-friendly businesses and activities. Although there is an awareness that “beautiful scenery” may not bring direct economic spending, the indirect effects, if managed effectively, can bring lasting benefits both to local residents and to visitors. Ecotourism has at last moved from being a side-show of the unusual to becoming a beneficial contributor to social, economic, and environmental development for rural communities.

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