

Atlantic Coast (Wester Ross) Project

Topic Paper:

Tourism and recreation

1. Introduction

This paper is one of a series prepared to help inform the future use and development of the coast and inshore waters of Loch Broom, Little Loch Broom, the Summer Isles and Gruinard Bay. The paper is the result of basic survey and evaluation work and should not be regarded as a policy document. It is however intended to help in the formulation of policy and to promote discussion. The Atlantic Coast project seeks to develop and test an integrated coastal zone plan for this area which can help in the evaluation of development proposals, guide investment, and minimise conflicts of interest. It aims to promote a balanced approach: one that can safeguard the area's core natural assets and sustain or enhance its productivity over the longer term.

This is an area which provides opportunities for a wide range of leisure activities. It has a dramatic and varied coastline, the attractive and lively fishing village of Ullapool, one of Scotland's most scenic groups of small offshore islands, remote communities, sheltered anchorages, abundant wildlife, fine beaches, archaeological sites, some good wreck diving and a rich underwater environment.

It is a popular holiday destination for tourists from the UK and overseas, many of whom are drawn by the beauty of the surroundings and the opportunities provided by the coast, sea and islands. Sailing and kayaking are increasingly popular with both tourists and locals, while cruise boats give visitors an opportunity to explore the islands and to see seals, porpoises and other wildlife at close quarters. Wrecks, caves, and a diversity of marine species bring divers to the area, and Loch Broom was well known in the past for its sea-angling. Maximising the area's potential for recreation and tourism is not without its problems however and the issues set out in this topic paper have been identified in response to concerns raised in the project area.

2. Historical Background

Wester Ross became a popular tourist destination in Victorian times, attracting visitors both for the fishing and stalking it offered, and for the scenery. The area's popularity grew through the twentieth century, with some of north Scotland's top hotels located in Ullapool. At the same time, the range of activities began to expand, with sea angling and cruises becoming popular.

The first cruise business was set up in the area in the 1930's, taking visitors on tours to see the wildlife and scenery of Loch Broom and the Summer Isles. Cruising peaked in the 1960s when there would be up to 300 people taking the

evening cruises out of Ullapool; however, it is still popular today, with several cruise operators working around the area.

In the 1950's and 60's the area was famous for its sea angling, and the world sea angling competition was held in Ullapool on two occasions. Sea angling trips were run out of Ullapool for many years, and a wide range of species were caught including ling, coley, pollack, whiting, haddock and skate. However, decreases in both the abundance and variety of species caught in recent decades, combined with the rising costs of insurance and boat maintenance, have made commercial sea angling charters unviable.

In the 1970's and 80's rowing boats, canoes and motorboats were available for rent, and even waterskiing was offered for a while. These activities were so popular that there were queues for boat hire. However, the costs of insurance and compliance with health and safety legislation have made these types of business too expensive to run.

Over recent years the focus of tourism in the area has shifted and the range of activities available to visitors has continued to increase, with a growing interest in active outdoor sports such as hillwalking and climbing, sailing, sea kayaking and diving. These activities tend to rely less on local facilities as visitors bring much of their own equipment with them, although activities such as diving provide opportunities for boat charters.

Clearly, there have been considerable changes over the past century in the types of recreational activities pursued by both visitors and locals in the project area. However, all these activities rely to a large extent on the natural heritage and dramatic landscapes of the area, and the experience of sea angling serves to emphasise the importance of protecting and nurturing these irreplaceable resources for the future.

3. Current situation

3.1. Recreational uses of the project area

3.1.1. Sailing

The project area offers some fine sailing, and Loch Broom is home to an active and growing sailing club of 150 members, of whom 40 are children. Local sailors are joined in the tourist season by many visiting yachts. Local boats have moorings in Ullapool, Loggie, Leckmelm, Ardmair, Old Dornie and Laide, and there are many more sheltered anchorages along the coast and among the islands which are used by visiting boats. However, there are no public moorings available.

Boats can be launched in only a few places around the project area, and many of these access points are in need of upgrading or repair. There is also a need for better facilities for both local and visiting sailors. These could include showering and changing facilities, toilets, drinking water, parking areas, storage space and winter storage for boats, or better signage to such facilities where they already exist.

3.1.2. Sea Kayaking

Sea kayaking is becoming an increasingly popular activity in the project area, due to the beautiful coastline and numerous islands. Kayakers frequently land and

sometimes camp on remoter islands. Outdoor activity training centres, such as the National Sports Centre at Glenmore Lodge, often base sea kayaking courses in the area during the summer months.

As with sailing, access can be a limiting factor. However, the relative ease with which kayaks can be transported and handled makes them easier to launch in areas without facilities. Beach launching is feasible at locations such as Badentarbat and Ardmair Bay.

3.1.3. Recreational diving

Diving is increasing in popularity in the project area due to the introduction of dive charters out of Ullapool in recent years. There are two active local dive clubs and an increasing number of visiting divers – mostly from elsewhere in the UK but sometimes from mainland Europe. The main draw to the area is scenic diving with a number of good wall dives available close to Isle Martin and Ben Mor Coigach. Popular dive sites also include four wrecks, the 'Fairweather', the 'Innesjura', the 'Boston Stirling' and the very recently wrecked 'Jambo'. Of the four wrecks, the fishing vessel 'Fairweather' is the most popular with divers. It is upright on the seabed and still fully intact, and at a maximum depth of 24m it is a relatively shallow dive. Local residents estimate that there is at least one dive party on the site every weekend during the summer.

Diving around the Summer Isles is relatively shallow, making the area popular with visiting dive parties which include less experienced divers. Many of these sites are well known for their abundant marine fauna, in particular Conservation Cave (also known as Cathedral Cave) on Tanera Beag. This has been noted by members of the Marine Conservation Society as one of the best dive sites in North West Scotland.

There are no facilities locally for visiting divers, who must bring their equipment with them.

3.1.4. Walking and climbing

The area has a number of fine coastal paths, providing access to some very remote parts of the coastline. The most notable of these is the path from Strathkanaird to Achiltibuie skirting the lower slopes of Ben More Coigach, and the path along the north side of Little Loch Broom which provides the only land access to the community of Scoraig. Parts of these paths are rough or in poor condition, and would benefit from maintenance and drainage. The Scottish Wildlife Trust has recently upgraded sections of the path from Strathkanaird to Achiltibuie, but the remainder of the path is rough and in places dangerous for inexperienced walkers.

Further, unofficial coastal paths have developed over the years in areas such as Reiff and Mellon Udrigle. These provide relatively easy walking and give good vantage points for viewing the area and marine wildlife such as seabirds and cetaceans.

This is a mountainous region, with some spectacular coastal peaks giving panoramic views over the project area and beyond to the Outer Hebrides. The dramatic shapes of Beinn Mor Coigach, Beinn Ghobhlach and An Teallach dominate many views over the project area and are justly popular with walkers and climbers.

Rock-climbing is popular in several parts of the area, notably the coastal cliffs near Reiff, the headland between Rhue and Ardmair, and the cliffs of Greenstone

Point. Reiff often enjoys dry weather even when rain is falling further inland. Parking can however be a problem for areas such as Reiff where space at the road end is limited.

3.1.5 Beach recreation

The northern part of the area has popular shingle/pebble beaches such as those at Ardmair and Badentarbat, and small, less well-known sandy beaches on Isle Ristol and at Badenscallie and Acheninver. The finest sandy beaches in the project area are found at Gruinard Bay and Mellon Udrigle in the south. These are popular with visitors in the summer, and have both been awarded 'Blue Flag' status for 2004. The Blue Flag scheme is an international award involving stringent tests on cleanliness and visitor facilities and is administered in the UK by the charity Environmental Campaigns (ENCAMS). Parking can be limited at Gruinard on busy days, and there are no toilet facilities which can be a problem as the beach is very popular with campers.

3.1.6. Sea angling

Ullapool used to be famous for sea angling, and for some years held the world record for the largest rod-caught skate. However, poor management of the inshore marine environment has led to serious declines in the abundance and variety of fish species caught.

Boats for sea fishing could be hired at Ardmair until 2003, but this has been discontinued. However, many visitors fish from their own boats and from the coast. It is still possible to catch species such as mackerel and coley, but not in the numbers that are remembered from the past.

3.2. Recreational provision for tourists

3.2.1. Cruises

Three cruise boats operate in the project area during the tourist season.

- The MV *Summer Queen* operates daily out of Ullapool, with trips to the Summer Isles, wildlife tours, and sunset cruises.
- Summer Isles Cruises with MV *Hectoria* run two tours daily from Badentarbat pier, Achiltibuie, going to the Summer Isles.
- Seascope Expeditions operates daily power boat trips around the Summer Isles, leaving from Ullapool.

Attractions on these tours include seal colonies, occasional whale/dolphin and porpoise sightings, and visits to the Summer Isles and Isle Martin. There are also visits to historical features such as old salmon netting stations and deserted villages, and to the cafe and post office (which produces its own stamps) on Tanera Mor.

3.2.2. Isle Martin

Summer guided walks are run on Isle Martin by students from Ullapool High School, covering flora and fauna and the history of the island. The trips leave from the Isle Martin slipway at Ardmair.

3.2.3. Diving boat charters

There have been a number of dive operations and dive boats available for charter in the area in recent years. At present one dive boat charter is operating locally,

based at Camusnagaul in Little Loch Broom, and a second boat with 'live-aboard' facilities has just set up in Ullapool.

There are a number of individuals locally with plans to establish dive operations in the near future, including one in Loch Broom/Ullapool and a second in Coigach.

4. Value of this sector

Despite the considerable use made of the project area for recreation and tourism, there are relatively few people employed directly in marine-based recreation or tourism jobs. Around six people are employed through the summer in running and manning cruise boats, and a further two to three are employed in the cafe and post office on Tanera Mor which rely heavily on the cruise boats for customers. Two dive operators are based in the area.

However, the marine and coastal environment is an important attraction for many visitors who choose the project area as a holiday destination. These visitors stay in local accommodation and use local services, and their contribution to the local economy is very significant.

5. Key issues and priorities

5.1. Assets

- Spectacular setting, very varied and unspoilt landscapes, islands, beaches, remote communities, sheltered anchorages.
- Abundant wildlife and a rich underwater environment.
- Numerous archaeological sites and wrecks.
- A number of active local clubs for recreational activities (diving, sailing etc).
- Ullapool Tourism and Business Association is an active local association promoting tourism and related activities in the project area.

5.2. Issues

- Lack of public access to the sea. There are few public jetties or slipways in the project area, and even fewer where it is possible to launch a boat. Many existing jetties/piers/slipways are in a poor state of repair. Highest priority for repair and alteration are probably those at Am Pollan in Ullapool and at Laide on Gruinard Bay.
- Lack of public moorings for use by visiting boats.
- Lack of funds and capacity for the repair and maintenance of piers, jetties, slipways and public moorings.
- Poor facilities onshore for visiting and local sailors (eg changing facilities, storage, toilets, water).
- There are a limited number of sheltered areas for anchorage, and many natural anchorages are also viewed as prime sites for fish farms (eg: Tanera Mor)
- Lack of any protective designation or management measures for high quality dive sites such as the wreck of the 'Fairweather'.
- Poor and unpredictable catches, where once they were plentiful, currently make sea angling economically unviable.
- Potential disturbance to wildlife, in particular cetaceans, by visiting boats.

5.3. Priorities

- Obtain support and funding for repair and maintenance of public piers, jetties, slipways and moorings around the area. Easy access to the sea is important in attracting and retaining marine tourism.
- Look at alternative sites for aquaculture developments to avoid further encroachment on safe anchorages and important dive sites.
- Protective designations for key areas of marine nature conservation and diving interest.
- Safeguard the quality of coastal landscapes through effective local planning and design guidance – particularly for industries which might impact adversely on them.
- Identify potential sites for marine interpretation facilities.

6. Development opportunities

- Apply for funding to repair and maintain certain jetties/slipways providing public access to the sea for all users. Laying and maintaining public moorings could be part of this package.
- Establishment of a marine visitor centre/marine life centre, raising awareness of local marine biodiversity, providing a visitor attraction, and providing jobs locally.
- Coastal wildlife observation/ fieldwork facilities, possibly in conjunction with a visitor centre (above).
- Development of pontoons and visitor facilities (toilets, showers, drinking water) in Ullapool Harbour, in conjunction with a breakwater.
- Development of scuba trails with interpretation for visiting divers.
- Consider the creation of new dive sites and/or sea angling sites through sinking old or decommissioned boats.
- Consider habitat creation (artificial reefs, wrecks) and/or protection as reserves, possibly in combination with restocking, in an effort to restore stocks of species suitable for sea angling.
- A commercial air-filling station in the area would improve the logistics for visiting divers and encourage more groups to visit or prolong their stay.
- Development of a watersports centre, providing equipment hire and courses.
- Improvement of car parks and provision of toilet facilities at key tourist sites such as Gruinard Bay and Reiff.

'Marine facilities in Wester Ross: A feasibility study' produced by Dr Robyn Dutton in 2000, recommends development of a strategy for marine tourism and marine activities, with the support and co-operation of local organisations (Community Councils, local clubs, pier users' groups, etc). This strategy should cover the upgrading and maintenance of sea access points, and the provision of moorings and shore facilities for local and visiting boat users. It should also cover the development of links with similar projects in other areas, the provision of information in the form of guidebooks, leaflets and signage, and a sound marketing strategy.

7. Conclusions

Tourism and recreation have played an integral part in the recent history of the project area, and are economically very significant today. While the area hosts many visitors annually, and there are many activities on offer, the tourism

market, both domestically and internationally, is a very competitive one, increasingly influenced by web-marketing and the availability of cheap air fares. There is a need to ensure that visitors continue to be attracted to the area for years to come through the provision of improved facilities and the safeguarding of the key natural and cultural resources on which the industry depends. This benefits local residents as well.

There are many potential developments to consider. The Atlantic Coast Project provides an opportunity to assess these in more detail and to ensure that new developments are sensitive to the needs of other users as well as environmentally sustainable.

8. Comments and additional information

Information in the paper was gathered from published documents, agency records, and local individuals and organisations. If any of the information in the paper is inaccurate or if you feel there are significant elements missing, please contact the Atlantic Coast Project Officer at the address below. Any changes necessary can be incorporated into a revised edition of the paper.

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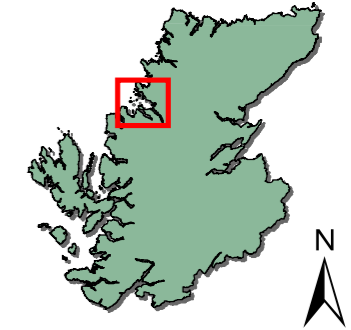
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24/04/05

Atlantic Coast (Wester Ross) Project

Recreation and Tourism



Legend

Topic: Recreation and Tourism

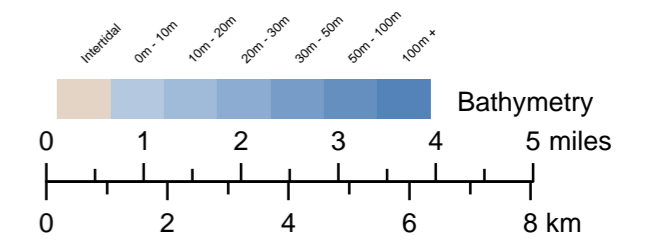
- Popular Beach
- Smokehouse
- Campsite
- Hill Walking
- Rock Climbing
- Dive Site
- Important Roadside Viewpoint
- Coastal Path

Topic: Marine Traffic

- Anchorage
- Harbour
- Jetty, Private or Public Access (Council Owned)
- Pier, Private or Public Access (Council Owned)
- Slip, Private or Public Access (Council Owned)

Topic: Map Base

- Settlement
- Main Peak
- Trunk Road
- A Road
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