

Flows to the Future – 2016

What is The Flow Country?

“The Flow Country” is an area of deep peat, dotted with bog pools, that forms the heart of the Caithness and Sutherland peatlands. It covers about 200,000 hectares, making it more than twice the size of Orkney. It’s the biggest and best example of this remarkable, wild habitat in the world.’

Flows to the Future is one of the most significant projects to come to The Flow Country of Caithness and Sutherland in recent decades. The £11 million Peatlands Partnership project, was launched in 2014 and during the last 12 months significant progress has been made in achieving its objectives.

In this article, Jenny Middlehurst, Communities Officer with the project, provides a month-by-month “diary” highlighting some of 2016’s most significant milestones

January

The New Year begins with the project making its mark on social media – an important way of communicating with new audiences across Scotland and beyond. For these new audiences we are The Flow Country on social media; you can find us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

February

Our website, www.theflowcountry.org.uk launches. This is the place to go to find out all about the Flow Country, what it is and why it’s so special. It features details on the peatland restoration and research. It highlights a wide range of events being delivered across Caithness and Sutherland and has stories provided by local people.

March

Through the Caithness International Science Festival we engage with 225 pupils from across Caithness. Using hands-on activities they learn about the differences between soil and peat, and about decomposition. The activities are delivered in collaboration with Teatime4Science, an initiative of researchers from the University of Utrecht (Netherlands).

April

The Flows Lookout, designed by Icosis Architects and built by Thurso-based O’Brien Construction, receives commendation in the Ambassador Award for Excellence at the Edinburgh Architectural Association.

Our tourism familiarisation event attracts twenty people active in the local tourism sector to Forsinard. The event includes a preview of our new film ‘The Flow Country’ created by the award-winning film-makers Maramedia, The event concludes with a wander to the Flows Lookout to admire the stunning panoramic view. There will be another event in Spring 2017.

John Henderson retires from the role of Chairman of the Peatlands Partnership and we welcome Professor Stuart Gibb from the Environmental Research Institute in Thurso to the

role. *“John has acted as Chair of the Peatland Partnership for 10 years and on behalf of all involved I would like to sincerely thank him for his outstanding service. It is an honour to be asked to take on this role, and I look forward to working with the expert and enthusiastic Partnership members in delivery of our current project goals and in exciting new ventures.*

Jenny Middlehurst is appointed as our new Communities Officer. Jenny is working with organisations and community groups across the Flow Country to develop exciting projects and events. If you have ideas for events or your community group would like to be involved please get in touch.

May

The Highland Council Ranger Service delivers a series of walks as part of the Peatland Walks Week with more than forty people attending events across the area.

The Flow Country features in the BBC's "Highlands – Scotland's Wild Heart" series which has since gone on to be shown in England and Wales and across the world.

The Flows Lookout again receives a major accolade as one of eleven winners of the best current Scottish architecture award/ by the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland. It is also commended in the Wood for Good / Forestry Commission Scotland category for best use of timber.

Pupils from Watten, Keiss, Kinlochbervie, Crossroads, and Lairg Primary Schools learn about the peatlands of the Flow Country at Forsinard and through outreach activities back at school.

June

Our new film 'The Flow Country', is premiered by the Screen Machine in Bettyhill. The film, created by the award winning company Maramedia (who produced the BBC "Highlands" series) highlights the natural and cultural heritage of the Flow Country, showcasing the importance of this area for both people and wildlife.

Pupils from Farr High and Tongue Primary who star in the film attend the screening along with members of the wider local community. Anna Magee, S1 student at Farr High says: *“Being involved in this project has made me more aware of the beautiful Flow Country surrounding us and has made me appreciate where I live.”*

Six primary teachers from across Caithness and Sutherland attend a teacher gathering as part of the Career Long Professional Learning course "Outdoor Learning in the Flow Country".

Visitors to Caithness Horizons gain a first glimpse of our new 3D digital landscape model and carbon capture computer game.

July

Gearoid Murphy, our Advisory Officer, spends ten days at Plantlife's Munsary Peatlands with a survey team from the University of East London to monitor the recovery of a blanket bog following peatland restoration. Davie Black from Plantlife says: *'Building up long-term monitoring of how the bog responds to management and climate change is a big commitment, and Plantlife has been lucky to have peatland expert Richard Lindsay of the University of East London undertaking the detailed survey work every seven years. Even better is that this summer Richard was able to train up a team from Flows to the Future Project and the Environmental Research Institute, based in Thurso, so we now have a pool of locally based researchers who can carry out this important work.'*

August

A series of events are delivered across Caithness to encourage people to explore the peatlands near them. These include a dragonfly and damselfly workshop in Reay and a "Discover Peatland" wildlife event at Newtonhill Croft near Wick.

Gearoid spends much of August out in the peatlands conducting habitat mapping on a upland estate in East Sutherland to inform the preparation of a Moorland Management Plan.

September

Fisheries are flavour of the month as we hold events celebrating the rivers and burns of The Flow Country. Firstly, with the Ulbster Arms and TUFF Fly Fishing we practice different casting techniques in Halkirk. Then, together with the West Sutherland Fisheries Trust and Highland Council Ranger Service we introduce the pupils of Scourie Primary School to their local burns.

Scottish Natural Heritage award Scotland's top environmental accolade to the recently expanded area of RSPB Scotland's Forsinard Flows nature reserve. The NNR designation has been extended by 3,960 hectares and now covers an area of 15,380 hectares.

The next phase of felling got under way with three harvesters and a forwarder on the Dyke Plantation working to clear plantation blocks west of the river Dyke. This work will continue until December following which they will continue on the east side of the river Dyke.

October

A major event for the project: the Flows Field Centre is finished and to celebrate we hold an open day that welcomes over 180 local people to the newly constructed state-of-the-art building. Visitors explore the new laboratory, student and volunteer accommodation and working space. A range of activities is organised by project staff, the RPSB team at Forsinard Flows and ERI staff. Among the visitors is Highland Councillor George Farlow. He says: *"It's great to see this amazing building coming to fruition. The large west facing windows fill it with light. It's an interesting layout inside too, a bit like the TARDIS - bigger on the inside than it is on the outside! It would be a lovely place to stay if you were working or studying in the Flow Country."*

Our Dark Skies event returns for its second year and stargazers are rewarded with starry skies and a glimpse of the Northern Lights. Local astronomer Gordon Mackie says *'Caithness Astronomy Group members were delighted to have been invited to join the Flows to the Future team again in an astronomy themed evening at the wonderfully dark location of Forsinard. It was good to see the event in the new Field Centre well attended, and we look forward to visiting the area again in 2017 to support another stargazing session.'*

A Boys Brigade group from Inverness is the first group to stay overnight in our new Field Centre. The weekend includes helping with important conservation work across the reserve, enjoying various outdoor activities and generally having fun in the peatlands.

November

Two young Scottish artists are appointed to explore and interpret The Flow Country, helping us to widen awareness and understanding of the peatlands. The artists will begin their residencies in Spring 2017 and will work with local organisations and communities to develop their work.

Our first newsletter makes its way to every household in Caithness and Sutherland giving people an insight into our work. . These newsletters will be produced annually so keep an eye out for a new edition in 2017!

Our new volunteer Anna Inman takes over our social media accounts and posts photos of the Flows Lookout and surrounding areas daily until Christmas. The national and international profile of the project, aided by publicity from the architectural awards, continues to grow.

December

Dornoch Academy's Higher Geography class practise their fieldwork skills during peatland field studies near the school. In Thurso Miller Academy's P4 and P5 pupils learn all about the weather & climate in school, building on their visit to Forsinard in September

Jenny Middlehurst, Communities Officer and Gearoid Murphy, Advisory Officer attend the International Union for Conservation of Nature UK Peatland Programme Conference in Shrewsbury. Jenny presents the project's work on our new interpretation including the Flow Country film, 3D digital landscape model and carbon capture computer game.

All of these innovative programmes, and much else, are showcased on our website

www.theflowcountry.org.uk

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