

Isle of Tiree Access Consultation 2011



Tiree Access Forum - March 2011

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Introduction

Tiree Rural Development Ltd (known as TRD) is a community company, limited by guarantee with charitable status charged with caring for the island's land-based interests on behalf of its residents and visitors. TRD works hard on many projects relating to the island's fragile biodiversity and crofting way of life. The agricultural community and environmental agencies on Tiree, work side by side to preserve the heritage of the island. Tiree is a livestock producing island and specific grazing regimes and agricultural systems are essential to maintain and preserve the unique habitats found.

There are 112 members in TRD with a core of 10 voluntary directors and has strong support from both residents and visitors. Much of TRD's work is funded by agencies and stakeholders such as Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), The Crofters Commission, RSPB and Argyll Estates but also relies on fund-raising to subsidise any income. (Tiree Rural Development Ltd, 2011)

One of TRD's many projects is that of the Access and Conservation project. This project is led by TRD, in partnership with the Tiree Community, Tiree Development Trust, SNH, RSPB and Argyll Estates. As part of this project the Tiree Access Forum was established, which addresses issues on the island relating to access to the land. The forum developed and secured funding from SNH and Argyll Estates for the provision of an Access and Conservation officer on the island. The access officer post was undertaken by Ian MacKinnon in 2008, Alison Spence in 2009, and David Taylor in 2010/11. As well as providing a 'one stop shop' for anyone wishing information on access and conservation issues, one of the main tasks was to monitor and report on issues arising from access to the land. In particular the effects of the increase in visitors accessing the beaches in motorised vehicles and the impact that has on the machair and natural environment of the island.

Machair grassland is a distinctive and complex habitat restricted to approximately 25,000ha in the world with 17,500ha in Scotland and 7,500 in Western Ireland. Of this 25,000ha, Tiree and Coll make up 4000ha. (National Archives, 2010)

Tiree is considered to have the most extensive and diverse area of Machair out with the Outer Hebrides, covering 24% of the total land cover of the island. (Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 2011) It is an extremely important habitat for a number of plants and animals such as the Corncrake *Crex crex* and the great yellow bumblebee *Bombus distinguendus*

Tiree machair and many of its associated species of flora and fauna are protected under European and UK legislation such as RAMSAR, SSSI, SAC and SPA. Machair is also listed as a priority habitat in the EU Biodiversity Action Plan, the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and Argyll and Bute Council Local Biodiversity Action plan.

Identified Problems

There has been a general increase in vehicles coming to Tiree over the last few years but in 2009 there was a steep rise in the number of campervan/motor homes coming to the island. A 50% increase in October to May 2008/2009 compared to the same period 2007/2008 and a 154% increase in June and July 2009 compared with the same period 2008.

Many of these vehicles parked overnight on the machair and at beachheads during the day to take advantage of the views and beaches with water sports such as windsurfing and surfing being very popular pastimes.

Erosion of machair due to vehicular access is widely published and recognized as a serious problem. It is most common in areas where vehicles have access to the wider machair such as on Tiree. Many park along the seaward edge of the machair to enjoy the view and this activity results in erosion of the machair through compaction of the vegetation along tracks and on the dunes. This allows strong winds to erode the topsoil, exposing the sand beneath. (Angus & Elliott, 1992)

It is particularly noted by Angus that the most extreme example of this type of erosion probably occurs on Tiree due to some windsurfers driving right to the edge of the machair, and then leaping down the eroding machair front to gain access to the beach. In the Western Isles, there has been an effort backed by EU Objective One funding linking agencies and communities aimed at alleviating minor problems of beach access before they become major, as well as attempting to improve planned vehicle and pedestrian access to beaches. (Angus S. , 2011)

2009 Report

A report was published on the provision of overnight parking sites in 2009 (ref: Provision of Overnight Parking Sites on Tiree/Alison Spence, Access and Conservation Officer - 05/01/2010). This report highlights the impacts of, in particular increased numbers of motor homes, on the environment and commercial interests of Tiree and its inhabitants. (Spence, 2009)

Findings relevant to this consultation from the 2009 report are summarized below: -

Sewage:

- Limited facilities for the disposal of chemical toilet waste. Previously and possibly still, chemical waste had been disposed of in the public toilets in Scarinsh and throughout the dune systems.
- Greater numbers of small campervans with no chemical toilets increases the amount of human waste in dune systems due to the lack of toilet facilities

Water:

- Increased demand in drier months on a limited supply causing water shortage, island wide.
- Seepage from the unregulated disposal of chemical toilet waste entering the water systems through septic tank soak away and open discharge near watercourses.

Landfill Waste:

- Poor public recycling facilities for non-household owners across the island.
- No outreach public refuse facilities resulting in private household bins being filled and recycling bins being misused.
- Increase in landfill will shorten the predicted lifespan of the current landfill site.

Business/Tourism:

- Loss of grazing due to off road driving and parking.
- Increase in water bills, as campervan/motor homeowners are using business water supplies.
- People who book holiday homes on the island may find it harder to make vehicle reservations as the use of campervan/motor homes increases. This could result in cancellations and loss of revenue for holiday homeowners.
- Lack of facilities for this group of users and the negativity they feel of not being welcome by being moved on will result in poor visitor experience with less return visits and poor publicity for the island.
- Tiree is known for its open space and stunning beaches. It has been commented on by visitors that the large presence of these units at the majority of the prime beauty spots and scattered along the dune ridges, is detracting from their visitor experience.

Interim Solutions

TRD Ltd has attempted to alleviate most of these problems by initiating an overnight campervan parking scheme. This allows crofters to have up to three campervans per night on a designated area of their croft. In exchange for this, visitors pay a nightly charge with 90% going to the crofter and 10% going to TRD Ltd who organise the booking and payment collection. The only official campsite has also been extended and TRD have been working closely with the owners to promote the croft sites to people with on board toilet facilities, thus freeing up space within the campsite for campers and smaller campervans. This has resulted in a decrease in the number of vehicles parking illegally on the machair overnight and alleviating some of the pressure.

Semi-formal parking areas have been established by TRD Ltd over the last few years. In 2008 there was the introduction of three test areas, Balevullin, Greenhill and Balephuill. These have shown various levels of success but in the main it has resulted in less misuse of the machair. These parking areas are delineated using rope and posts, and blue 'P' signs.

To maintain these areas and to raise funds for future projects, the voluntary parking permit was introduced. £490 was raised between October and December 2009 and £930 in 2010. The uptake in 2011 has improved again with £530 raised to end July. This scheme will remain in place for the foreseeable future to continue raising funds.

It has always been the aim of the Access Forum to establish a sustainable management plan for island wide access. After the success of the previous projects and with more understanding of the needs of visitors and residents, TRD Ltd wish to apply for funding to implement further changes which will enhance the current schemes, enable continued conservation of the machair habitat and improve the visitor experience. To determine what funding would be applied for, and to ensure that there was support for such a project, TRD Ltd undertook a consultation process. The consultation ran from February till June 2011.

Consultation Methodology

Bids were invited for the position of Access Consultant in January 2011 with myself being the successful applicant. After consultation with SNH on suitable design consultants for the project, Roots Designs were given the contract due to their local knowledge of Tiree and environmental ethos of sustainable design.

A questionnaire was designed and placed in the local paper, An Tirisdeach. Copies were also made available at MacLeods Store, Crossapol; The Co-op, Scarinish; and the Tiree Rural Centre. Questionnaires were distributed by David Taylor, The Tiree Access Officer, and Catrina Spink. Discover Tiree advertised the consultation on their website and gave a link for an online edition. Questionnaires were emailed to individuals who had left contact details with TRD Ltd, who had used the crofting campsites in 2010. Information was sent to windsurfing websites appealing for comments on the proposals.

Visits were made to crofters and interested parties who had requested a meeting to discuss issues relating to access to the land. This included landowners and managers where improvements have been suggested or where consultation was required to implement new parking areas. Many of the sites are owned by Argyll Estates but managed by township grazing committees. These committees were consulted if changes to the current land management practices were to be proposed.

Emails were sent to local community groups requesting comments, also local watersports companies, SNH, RSPB and Argyll Estates.

All results were collated, and analysed and produced in a report Isle of Tiree Access Consultation 2011: Results and Analysis. This is included as appendix i of this report.

Roots Designs prepared visualisation boards (Annex ii) which were displayed within Tiree Rural Centre for two weeks. Comments forms and questionnaires were made available to members of the public and the results are available in the above mentioned report.

A visit was arranged to meet with members of the environmental and outdoor access team from the Western Isles council. Visits were made to beaches in Benbecula, North/South Uist and Balranald RSPB nature reserve.

Legislative Considerations

Many of the areas under consideration for improvements are protected under European and UK conservation legislation. SNH must be consulted on all proposals, materials and best practice policies on these sites.

Disability Discrimination Act, where feasible and within reasonable means the needs of individuals with disabilities must be considered in the provision of access.

Land Reform Scotland Act - SOAC

Health and Safety Act

Occupiers Liability Act

Consultation Results

All results are presented in full within the Isle of Tiree Access Consultation: Annex i - *Results and Analysis* report August 2011.

Annexes

Annex i: Consultation Results and Analysis.

Annex ii: Draft Recommendations for Access Infrastructure Solutions

Annex iii: Draft Outline Costs based on Draft Recommendations

References

National Archives, 2010

Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 2011

UK Biodiversity Action Plan

Argyll Bute Council Local Biodiversity Action plan.

Angus & Elliott, 1992

Angus S. , 2011

Provision of Overnight Parking Sites on Tiree/Alison Spence, Access and Conservation Officer - 05/01/2010

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