

Communicating protected area significance through creative experience in the NNRs of Wales¹

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Introduction

Britain's National Nature Reserves are IUCN category IV protected areas in which protection of wildlife is the priority. Sections 16-29 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act and the subsequent 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act allow for the establishment of nature reserves. These include National Nature Reserves, which are areas that are considered to be of national importance because they are habitats for important or rare species.

NNRs have the highest level of conservation protection under UK legislation. They are also Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The designation also protects against any damaging operations and development on or near the site. Most are open to the public and many have high visitor numbers because they are visited for general tourism and recreation as well as for their nature conservation value. This can cause a conflict of interests for management and in deciding what values should be communicated and how.

Background

NNRs in Wales are designated by the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW). There are 71 NNRs in Wales ranging in size from half a hectare to 8,000 hectares. Some are owned and managed by CCW but others are owned by other bodies, such as the RSPB (Royal Society for Protection of Birds) and there are often several partners or stakeholders involved.

Because of the importance of these reserves and the popularity of some with visitors, information and interpretation is a key aspect of their management. CCW also has a duty to involve local communities in understanding the significance of their reserves and how they are managed.

A Sense of Arrival

In 2001 CCW decided to experiment with an interpretation project on five NNRS that they called ***A Sense of Arrival***. The whole project was a learning experience for both CCW and Creu-ad as neither had worked on this kind of project before.

The purpose of the project was to:

- Promote a wildlife experience for visitors
- To focus attention on the significance of NNRs
- To create a 'sense of arrival' through a sculptural installation/s
- To involve local people in the process of interpreting the reserve

¹ *Communicating values and benefits of protected areas in Europe* Seminar organised by BfN and the EUROPARC Federation at the International Academy for Nature Conservation on the Island of Vilm, Germany, April 2009 Edited by Sue Stolton.

Understanding Interpretation

'Interpretation aims to explain the meaning of things – places, objects, artefacts, activities, ideas – in ways that connect with people's lives'. Forestry Commission Scotland

'Interpretation enriches our lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experience and deepening understanding of people, places, events and objects from past and present'.

Association of Heritage Interpreters

CCW decided to work with artists on this project because:

It thought that it is important to engage with people about nature conservation on a personal and emotional level, which is not often achieved by more conventional interpretation.

- Many visitors to popular NNRS come for recreation and enjoyment and they may respond to innovative ways of communication
- It was seen to be a good way to work directly with members of the local community and especially with young people through schools

Creu-ad Heritage Interpretation was contracted to deliver this work and our role was to:

- Work with reserve wardens to decide on key values of each site and how the planned project would link with their work
- Develop design ideas and contract artists to carry them out
- Work with local community groups and individuals, if possible involving them in developing their own ideas about why the reserve was important

Two site experiences – Ynyslas Dunes and Cors Caron

- **Ynyslas Dunes:** Bar-built, drying, sand estuary; Dunes actively growing; Dune slacks are 'humid'; receives 200,000 visitors a year. The dunes are important for dune fungi, bryophytes, higher plant assemblage, mining bee particular to a few dune systems in Wales, the *Agroeca dentigera*, a spider only known here in UK and many breeding birds.
- **Cors Caron:** Raised bog or 'mires' – largest in Britain south of Scotland; Peat; River Teifi runs through; Almost intact marginal habitats; receives 30,000 visitors a year. Landscape evolving over more than 12,000 years, three distinct habitats and associated with restoration of the red kite in Britain.

The process of engagement

- Examples of work with local people
- Workshop between wardens and artists to exchange responses to the site and ideas about how the arts could be used
- Development and discussion of initial designs – the interaction with CCW, and its partners
- Issues at some reserves, including nervousness about placing anything in such a highly protected environment

Creative communication is a process, you need to:

- Listen to the people who manage the site

- Identify key themes or messages
- Work with local communities
- Produce a plan
- Develop designs
- Consult everyone involved before implementing

Sensitivity to the site:

- Remember it is a nature reserve
- Place things with care
- Use appropriate materials
- Create an entrance situation like a temple

Evaluating the project

- Confusion between art and interpretation
- No visitor surveys
- Effects difficult to measure – may be lasting memories
- Impact on people who take part