

The Highland Council

**Skye, Ross and Cromarty Area Committee –
22 April 2015**

Agenda Item	11
Report No	SRC/028/15

Wester Ross Biosphere

Report by Head of Policy and Reform

Summary

The Area Committee is asked to note progress towards the submission of an application to UNESCO to renew the designation of the Beinn Eighe Biosphere Reserve. Current UNESCO guidelines require a larger area, including substantial population and following consultation with communities, the proposal is to include the western portion of Ward 6, creating the Wester Ross Biosphere.

Members are asked to support the application and Agree that The Council should be a signatory to the submission.

1. Background

- 1.1 Launched in 1971, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB) is an Intergovernmental Scientific Programme that aims to establish a scientific basis for the improvement of relationships between people and their environments. MAB combines the natural and social sciences, economics and education to improve human livelihoods and the equitable sharing of benefits, and to safeguard natural and managed ecosystems, promoting innovative approaches to economic development that are socially and culturally appropriate, and environmentally sustainable.
- 1.2 There are currently 631 Biosphere Reserves in 119 countries, with five in UK, including Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve (NNR) in Wester Ross, which became a Biosphere Reserve (BR) in 1976.
- 1.3 In 1995, UNESCO's requirements for this accolade changed to emphasise regional sustainable development. As part of this change, older style BRs were required to either apply to renew their status under the new rules or be delisted.
- 1.4 Under the new arrangements, the area designated is expected to encompass three zones:
 - a core area which, comprises a protected ecosystem that contributes to the conservation of landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic variation
 - a buffer zone which surrounds or adjoins the core areas, and is used for activities compatible with sound ecological practices that can reinforce scientific research, monitoring, training and education.

- a transition area where most of the population live and the greatest activity occurs, fostering economic and human development that is socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable.

1.5 Work to renew the Biosphere designation for Beinn Eighe has been ongoing since 2009 but has seen most progress since the appointment of consultants by Scottish Government in March 2014.

2. Consultations

2.1 Scottish Government appointed independent consultants Assist Social Capital, (who have experience of other Biosphere work internationally) to determine whether there was community support for a redesignated Biosphere in Wester Ross.

2.2 Following extensive dialogue and attendance at a range of Community meetings, the consultation suggests that there is a strong community desire to progress with the process of redesignation.

2.3 A working Group was established to advise on the extent of the area to be included in a submission to UNESCO and to identify Core, Buffer and Transition Zones.

The proposed Core Zones comprise, the Beinn Eighe NNR, Loch Maree Islands NNR and Coille Mhor Special Area of Conservation, Balmacara.

It is expected that Buffer Zones will include National Trust for Scotland land at Torridon Estate, Balmacara Estate and Kintail and Morvich Estate.

Since all areas of Wester Ross and Lochalsh expressed interest in being included in the Biosphere, the Transition Zone largely reflects the Ward boundary to the north and south. The eastern border would be at Garve, while to the west, the transition zone would include the coast from Arnisdale to Coigach, parts of which are within Marine Protected Areas.

3. Current Position

3.1 In keeping with the ethos of UNESCO and in the spirit of Community Empowerment, it is proposed that the Governance and Management of the Biosphere should be through a partnership of Agencies and Community Organisations. Options on how this might be developed are included in the Consultant's draft development plan which is attached at Appendix 1.

3.2 A formal submission to UNESCO requires to be submitted through Scottish and UK Governments by 30 September 2015 and to meet this deadline, the nomination document requires to be completed and signed by a range of interested parties by end of May.

3.3 Any submission to UNESCO requires to have the support of the Local Government and Skye, Ross and Cromarty Area Committee has been identified as the appropriate Committee to agree Highland Council support.

3.4 Ward Members have been included in the consultation process since 2008 and recorded their formal support for the designation at a Ward Business Meeting in February 2015.

3.5 Scottish Natural Heritage, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Forestry Commission Scotland, The National Trust for Scotland, The Scottish Crofting Federation and Scottish Land and Estates have all expressed support for the designation process.

4. Implications

4.1 Resource Implications. There are no direct Resource Implications arising out of this report. It is envisaged that The Council will work closely with the Biosphere Project but within existing work plans and budgets (examples would include inputs and activities by Ward Manager, the Ranger Service, Access Officers, Biodiversity officers etc).

It is expected that the Biosphere might from time to time be an applicant for Council funding towards specific activities and projects. Any such applications for funding would follow normal approval procedures as and when they were submitted.

4.2 Gaelic Implications. One of the aims of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme is to ensure that Economic Development is not only environmentally sustainable but supports local culture and traditions.

4.3 Rural Implications. The Biosphere Programme is designed to promote appropriate rural development and support rural communities.

4.4 No Legal, Equality, Risk or Climate Change/Carbon Clever implications have been identified.

Recommendation

The Area Committee is invited to:

Agree that The Council should be a signatory to the submission to UNESCO, to designate an area of Ward 6 as a Biosphere.

Designation: Ward Manager, Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh

Date: 10 April 2015

Author: Robbie Bain

A Biosphere for Wester Ross

Options for Governance, Management and Delivery

March 2015

This document outlines some options for a governance, management and delivery plan, required for a Wester Ross Biosphere (WRB) nomination in order to deliver sustainable development through the 3 key biosphere functions.

1 Introduction

1.1 Biospheres Reserves are areas of world-class natural value, designated by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational and Scientific and Cultural Organisation). They demonstrate people working in harmony with nature for the benefit of all.

The benefits of achieving international biosphere status include:

- An integrated framework for conservation and sustainable development policies and initiatives
- A driver of best practice in environmental management and development planning
- Profile of a world-class brand, providing increased marketing and funding opportunities
- Opportunities to create and attract new enterprises and jobs
- Scope to foster a stronger sense of community awareness and pride in the local environment
- Encouraging applied research by local universities and Colleges as centres of excellence to address environmental conservation and sustainable development challenges
- Knowledge exchange opportunities through the international MAB network

Having biosphere status does not create new protected areas, nor any new regulations and does not restrict economic development or the rights of landowners or the public.

UK Biospheres

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire - www.qsabiosphere.org.uk

Dyfi - <http://www.biosfferdyfi.org.uk/en>

Brighton and Lewes Downs - <http://biospherehere.org.uk>

North Devon - www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk

1.2 Wester Ross Biosphere Nomination

UNESCO recognised Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve as a Biosphere Reserve (BR) in 1976. At that time, the focus of BRs was on conservation objectives. In 1995, UNESCO's requirements for this accolade changed to emphasise regional sustainable development. To continue, older style BRs are required to apply for the new status. For Beinn Eighe, this means expanding to cover a much larger area.

The activity of a Wester Ross Biosphere would cover three key functions:

- Conservation
- Knowledge Exchange
- Sustainable Economic Development

1.3 Preparatory Work

A significant amount of preparatory work has been undertaken in the past few years, which has led to the opportunity to nominate a wider area to be known as the Wester Ross Biosphere (WRB), *Biosphere Ros an Iar* in Gaelic.

- **1999** – University of Oxford – Review of UK Biosphere Reserves
- **2009** – Hambrey Consulting – UK Biosphere Reserves status, opportunities and potential: Beinn Eighe and Wester Ross
- **2011/12** - A scoping study proposed by Wester Ross Alliance and carried out by UHI concluded that there is considerable opportunity for a new-style BR as a mechanism for driving development both within and between communities in Wester Ross
- **2013** – Proposal to Scottish Government by Assist Social Capital CIC (ASC) to explore local interest in extending the area of the existing Beinn Eighe Biosphere and to facilitate a nomination process if positive
- **2013** – Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and The Highland Council (THC) ratify the proposal and agreed to seek wider community support before progressing
- **2014 March** – Positive response at meeting to determine local interest in the proposal to explore an extended biosphere for Wester Ross
- **2014 May** – Wester Ross Biosphere Project (WRBP) Development Officer employed by ASC
- **2015 January** – first 6 months engagement in the wider community shows sufficient local support for extending the biosphere area. Phase II begins to define transition, buffer and core areas and to develop nomination form and governance model
- **2015 February** – Zonation meeting to determine the core, buffer and transition zones
- **2015 February** – Strategic meeting to consider next steps to completing the nomination form which constitutes the application for an extended biosphere

2 UNESCO Nomination

A description of how the WRB will operate and be governed is **required as part of the nomination process**. The description does not need to be in great detail, however agreeing a development plan for governance process, which enables stakeholders to fully participate and work together, will strengthen the application; ensure stakeholders understand their roles; and help everyone to work together to achieve the required outcomes for WRB.

Appendix 1

The three key biosphere functions – conservation, knowledge exchange and sustainable economic development – must be prioritised within an Action Plan. To successfully compile an Action Plan and deliver against agreed outputs, it is essential that there is clarity on:

- a) decision-making processes
- b) setting strategic direction
- c) and the day to day management of the activity

2.1 How a Development Plan fits with the Nomination Process

A development plan explains the management arrangements and delivery mechanism required to respond to Section 4.6 and part 4.7 (c) of UNESCO's nomination form.

Section 4.6 states:

Organisational arrangements should be provided for the involvement and participation of a suitable range of inter alia public authorities, local communities and private interests in the design and the carrying out of the functions of a biosphere reserve.

And 4.7 (c) asks for information on the following:

a designated authority or mechanism to implement this policy or plan

The other parts of section 4.7 are concerned with the detail of the management of conservation, socio-economic activity and knowledge sharing which would be determined as part of an overall Action Plan once the mechanism for management has been established.

Once a strategy to take the development plan forward is in place, the nomination process can be completed.

2.2 How a Biosphere Fits with the National Context

Scotland, like the rest of the UK and other countries across Europe, is shifting from a more traditional top-down approach to decision making, towards localities, with a focus on co-production and asset-based approaches where communities are part of the answer. In 2010, the Christie Commission report called for radical reform of public service delivery and said that communities needed to be at the heart of the design and delivery process. This has been strengthened through the introduction of the Scottish Government's Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill, which aims to provide people with the power to become involved in local decision-making.

Taking into consideration the financial and environmental challenges we face and the international agreements arrived at events such as Kyoto and Rio+20, it is clear there is a growing need for change in our approach to managing our economic, social and natural resources.

UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere programme and its insistence in the active participation of local communities in how decisions are made at a regional level, provides a strong model to achieve these aims, tried and tested in hundreds of different contexts, over many years. Each subscribes to the fundamental elements of the MAB Framework, yet each is unique, relevant to its own history, culture, geography and laws.

3 Wester Ross Biosphere - Governance and Management Options

The meeting on 30th of March provides the opportunity for a wide range of stakeholders to decide on the direction of travel and what happens next in terms of governance, management and delivery of a Wester Ross Biosphere.

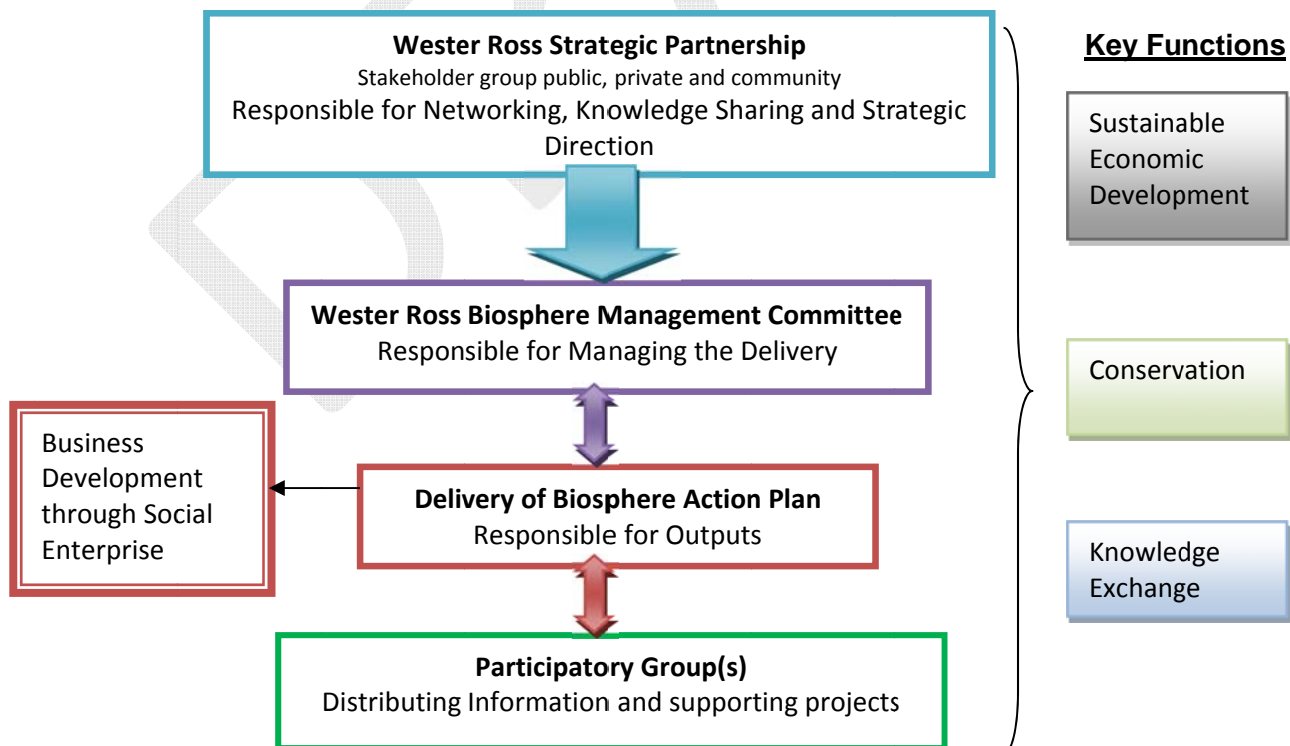
The momentum generated over the last 10 months through a range of events, meetings, reports etc, can be used to take the next, important steps. The exact process of how that happens will depend on what the local community wishes to see.

3.1 Some examples of how this might happen:

- A Strategic Partnership could take time to become a constituted body and put forward applications for core funding to a range of funders. This could then be built on through LEADER and other funding streams for additional projects
- A LEADER funding bid could be put forward by the Strategic Partnership, via one of the partners, for an element of the core funding for a Wester Ross Biosphere. The biosphere activity could be put out to tender, once the funding has been achieved
- An organisation or a group of organisations, with the skills required, could to make a LEADER application, with match funding from public agencies, to deliver the objectives of the biosphere on behalf of the Strategic Partnership
- Other options

3.2 What could the structure look like?

Structure Diagram of WRB



3.3 Participants, Roles and Challenges

3.3.1 Wester Ross Biosphere Strategic Partnership

A Strategic Partnership (SP) offers a range of stakeholders the opportunity to be represented ([Brighton and Lewes Downs Biosphere Partnership](#)). Diverse knowledge and experience of the area of the biosphere will be key to the success of the three key functions. Community representatives will hold a majority of the places on the SP.

Partners are invited from:

- Relevant agencies, including Highland Council, SNH, HIE, FCS, NTS
- Local Businesses; hotels, B and B's and activity providers, local food producers, crofters, etc.
- Land owners
- Environmental groups
- Community organisations; community councils, development trusts, social enterprises, charities, etc.

The role of the WRB Strategic Partnership is to:

- Bring people together to create a common vision and collaborate on a regional scale
- Determine and maintain effective coordination of activity
- Clarity of responsibilities of the different bodies on the SP
- Agree an Action Plan for delivery of the three key functions.
- Provide occasional in kind support for the Delivery Agent where necessary

3.3.2 Wester Ross Biosphere Management Committee

A Management Committee (MC) would be made up of a smaller group of individuals with experience of delivering against agreed outcomes and the skills and knowledge to contribute to the three main aims of the biosphere. They would have responsibility for ensuring the Action Plan is created, monitored and delivered effectively.

Members of the SP who wish to participate in the MC could put themselves forward and/or be selected by the SP.

The MC would meet quite regularly, perhaps every six to 8 weeks.

The role of the WRB MC could include:

- Developing a decision-making framework for agreement by the SP
- Direction and management of core activity and delivery of the WRB Action Plan
- Responsibility for financial reporting

3.3.3 Wester Ross Biosphere Delivery

Whatever the structure adopted, the organisation responsible for delivering the activities of a Wester Ross Biosphere should be eligible to apply for and access a wide variety of funds in order to carry out its activities: Big Lottery, Heritage Lottery, Public funds, private investors and Government incentives for new social enterprise business.

The role of a Biosphere organisation for Wester Ross includes:

- Develop sustainable sources of income for core activity as well as sourcing appropriate project funding
- Facilitate cooperation across the 3 zones and 3 functions

Appendix 1

- Deliver social and economic benefits for local communities
- Develop research activities to ensure benchmarks for monitoring economic, social and environmental activity
- Develop systems to monitor the activity and benefits; social, environmental and economic, delivered through the three key functions
- Promote demonstration projects on how social enterprise can link conservation and use of natural resources to economic development, giving examples of best practice
- Ensure learning and knowledge exchange locally, regionally, nationally and internationally
- Secure funding to implement independent projects as agreed by the SP and approved by the MC
- Organise exchanges via the World Network of Biosphere Reserves and EuroMAB to learn from activities taking place in different communities
- Support SP and MC

4. March to May 2015

ASC's contract for the Wester Ross Biosphere Project (WRBP) ends on 30th May 2015. Below is the list of actions to take place before the end of the contract.

- 30th March – initial Strategic Partnership (SP) meeting
- Finalise draft nomination form for revision by UK MAB
- End of May - second SP meeting:
 - Nomination document signed by authorities managing the biosphere zones
 - Next steps agreed
- Submit Nomination Form end May

5 June to August 2015 – Nomination Progress and Funding

During this period Professor Martin Price (Chair of the UK MAB Committee) would monitor the Biosphere Nomination process and ensure submission to UNESCO by the deadline of 30 September.

6 Next Steps for Wester Ross Biosphere

The Strategic Partnership explores with the agencies the possibility of funding being made available to support further development, in anticipation of the formal response to the Wester Ross Biosphere nomination. This could include the following activity:

- Monitor the sourcing of future funding to deliver a WRB Action Plan
- Respond to any requests for information from UNESCO
- Define a decision making framework for the delivery of WRB activities
- Identify prospective members for the Management Committee
- Discuss a draft Action Plan
- Keep wider community informed of progress

Man and the Biosphere Programme

Launched in 1971, UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB) is an Intergovernmental Scientific Programme that aims to establish a scientific basis for the improvement of relationships between people and their environments. MAB combines the natural and social sciences, economics and education to improve human livelihoods and the equitable sharing of benefits, and to safeguard natural and managed ecosystems, promoting innovative approaches to economic development that are socially and culturally appropriate, and environmentally sustainable.

The World Network of Biosphere Reserves currently has **631 biosphere reserves in 119 countries**. More information on [Man and the Biosphere Programme](#)

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