

## Establishing a Unique Visitor Attraction for the Area – The “Binocular Trail”

### Background:

As per discussions at the T@ meeting, dated September 2006

*“Project: The Binocular Trail / Tour (provisional name only)*

*A trail / tour consisting of high quality galvanised & weatherproof Binoculars (coin operated) placed at key viewpoints throughout the area. The actual sites to tie in with existing information (leaflets+ Coastal Trail), and have information boards at each viewpoint outlining what can be seen through the binoculars. Information suggestion enclosed.*

Wester Ross has approximately 11 panoramic viewpoints along the popular routes of the A832 & the A835 North towards Assynt. These have high levels of visitor numbers for much of the season, and a continuing (if lower) level of passers by at other times of the year. The great majority of people who pull into these viewpoints are deeply curious about exactly what they are looking at, yet have little or no way of deciding this for themselves. Therefore we propose to meet this demand with the equipment described above. Such equipment must be of very high quality, able to sustain and pay for itself if possible, be of low maintenance, and have a unique selling point if at all possible. The associated information boards will tell visitors exactly what they are seeing through the binoculars, and could also carry information about the communities encountered along the route – services, facilities, general information etc. Finally, the “trail” will be replicated in printed form so as to encourage visitors along this unique feature of touring in Wester Ross.

### Research:

The methodology employed was as follows:

- Establish which viewpoints would be the most effective locations for the project

These were largely identified through common knowledge and existing work (ref: JB’s driving trail). However, there were additions / subtractions to these for a variety of reasons. Principal to these was a practical exercise undertaken where two members of the group travelled through WRoss on a clear day, making observations and notes regarding where the best situations might be. These were tied in with work by Jim Buchanan of Poolewe, who has an existing map showing possible locations for viewpoint information.

- Identify Equipment

Inquiries showed that there were a number of possible products to meet the specification. Costs vary according to quality, construction, and optical performance. However, the choice (in the UK at least) narrowed down to only ONE supplier who could supply the equipment in a specification that would meet the demands of many of the Wester Ross sites in terms of weatherproofing. This was Monk Optics Ltd, based in Chepstow, England.

[www.monkoptics.co.uk](http://www.monkoptics.co.uk)



The pedestal makes this a very suitable model for professional use, with minimal adjustable parts this is very hard wearing and maintenance free. Galvanised pedestal model is available for permanent outdoor mounting. Also available for permanent outdoor use: 100% waterproof marinated model with extra protection and focus-free for public viewing

Cost: £2,000 approx per unit.

**Note:**

There were NO other potential suppliers that could promise waterproof / weatherproof construction, unless we opted to purchase from the USA.

The next procedure was to work out likely Visitor patterns and numbers to the identified viewpoints. It was thought that data for the above will be held by Highland Council / AA organisation / other road & traffic organisations, however despite approaches to the local HC Environmental Services contact, this information was never forthcoming.

Concurrent with trying to source this information, we met with both SNH and the local Highland Council safety officer. The purpose of this was to see what issues they felt might be encountered in adapting existing car park - or similar - locations for parking / locating binoculars.

A factual report must show that there were some difficulties with the above actions and subsequent findings:

- One meeting and two written approaches were made to Highland Council through the suggested route of the local Environmental Officer. Despite this, no information was ever forthcoming.
- The HC safety officer was particularly negative about many aspects of potential safety / litigation resulting from usage of sites (note: most of these are already used by visitors, and many are fully finished and surfaced - our project would not be adding markedly to this usage, but would actually be aimed at greatly enhancing the existing visitor experience)
- Concerns were expressed about landlords of existing sites refusing permission for this use

***Conclusion: This underlines the extraordinary land use issues faced in the Highlands. Landlords are frequently in possession of huge tracks of land, often holding valuable development projects hostage due to their reluctance to allow public access to even a tiny piece of their estate. Further to that, we have turned into a society full of concerns about safety, insurance & legal issues. Participants in the NEST visit to Iceland will recall a discussion where our regulations were frankly ridiculed for their over- restrictive effects on valuable educational projects. We were the only country present where a project such as this would have been held back or even cancelled due to these problems.***

### **Costs & Sustainability:**

Despite the fact this could be a relatively expensive proposal in terms of hardware and installation, the points above were researched & considered with a view to coin operation.

The units themselves were to be chosen for their dependability and reliability, and it was clarified with the makers that the optics can be periodically reconditioned, as opposed to requiring replacement of the whole unit.

### **However:**

We have NOT expanded on this section here, as circumstances dictated that the project work was halted at this stage (see below\*\*). Suffice to say that on the basis of the durability of the chosen equipment, and coin operation / solar power being chosen as the joint sources for the workings of the units, we believe that this could indeed be sustainable over a number of years.

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A decision was taken to halt this and one other project in order to push ahead and develop a regional website, aimed at promoting Wester Ross itself. This followed one of the principal recommendations of the Marketing Strategy, and the action was voted for by all members present at the relevant meeting of T@ Wester Ross / NEST / SNH. Nevertheless, the Binocular Trail has been sufficiently researched and costed for us to take up this work at a future date should we so wish.

*D. Gibson, Celtic Fringe Tourism Association, September 2007*

