



Go with the Flows?

The Flow Country World Heritage Site Project



THE
FLOW
COUNTRY

Foreword

A Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS) could become a significant accolade for Caithness and Sutherland and the many organisations, businesses, land managers, crofters and farmers in the area; it could also bring positive development opportunities, though undoubtedly some challenges too.

The purpose of this consultation is to present the outline idea for a WHS and to establish what local communities feel about it; and to see how local aspirations can potentially be met through the development of a World Heritage Site that meets local needs as well as recognizing the global importance of this area of blanket bog.





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What is The Flow Country?

The Flow Country sometimes referred to locally as “The Flowes”, is a vast expanse of deep blanket peat interspersed with a beautiful array of bog pools and dubh lochs. The name “Flow Country” derives from the Scots word “flow” or “flowe”, meaning a wet peat bog.

Of particular importance is the extent and quality of blanket bog in Caithness and Sutherland, with this corner of Scotland holding the biggest and best peatland of this type in the world. Significantly Scotland, for such a small country, plays a key role in conserving this globally-rare habitat. Blanket bog covers around 20% of Scotland’s land area which is around 15% of all the blanket bog in the world.

Blanket bog can only form in cool areas with lots of rainfall; in fact it relies entirely on rain and snow for water. The relatively few plant species that thrive in this habitat do not rot away after they die; rather, they build up and eventually form deep layers of peat. The blanket bog of The Flow Country has been accumulating since the last Ice Age – over 10,000 years ago – with the peat standing at 10 metres deep in places!

Even if you haven’t wandered through any blanket bog you are probably familiar with some of the key plants found there: it is dominated by species like sphagnum mosses, cotton grasses, heathers, deer grass, and the insectivorous sundews and butterworts.

The birds that inhabit the blanket bog are important too, and many are at a crossroads in their European and global distributions here, which means that there is a unique collection of birds in the Flowes. This includes red and black throated divers, golden plover, greenshank, merlin and golden eagle.

Find out more about the Flow Country and blanket bog at www.theflowcountry.org.uk

Where is the Flow Country?

For those not familiar with it, the Flow Country sits in the far northern Highlands of Scotland, and encompasses much of the counties of Caithness and Sutherland.

Figure 1 shows the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC) which contains the blanket bog areas that are likely to be at the heart of the World Heritage Site proposal. However the SAC doesn't contain all of the potentially important areas of blanket bog in the Flow Country, and the core area of the WHS would most likely be bigger than the SAC.



Figure 1: Map showing the extent of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC constituent sites shown in blue).

The consultation area, shown in Figure 2, encompasses the wider Flow Country area (note that not all of this area is blanket bog, rather, the blanket bog is a vital component of an intricate mixture of habitats and land uses, including roads etc.). The final proposed World Heritage Site boundary will lie somewhere within this consultation area, and is likely to encompass the best blanket bog, buffered by other areas necessary to protect it.

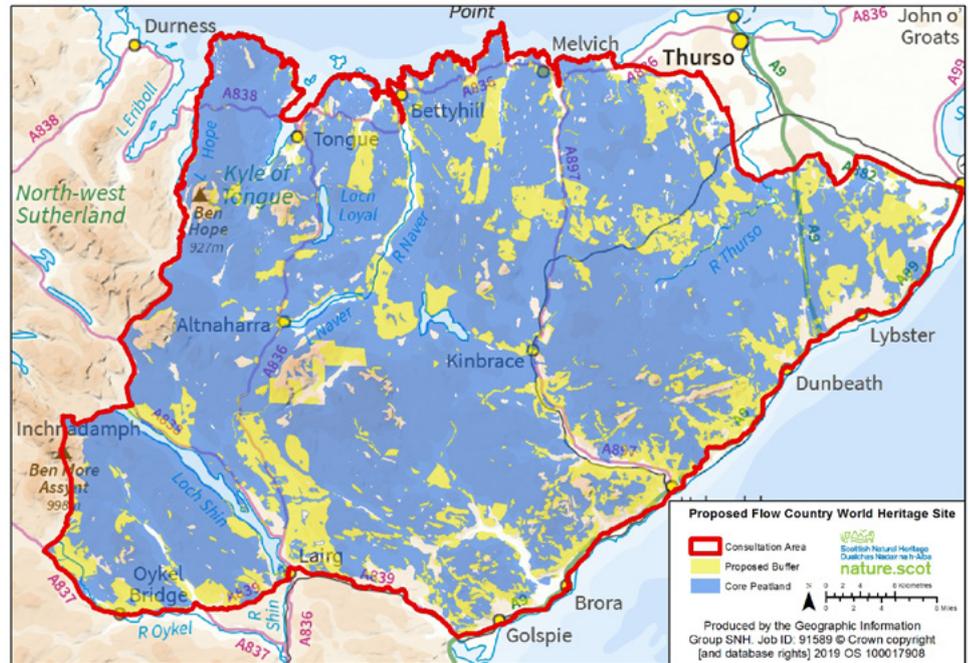


Figure 2 : Map showing the Consultation Area, Area of Core Peatland within and beyond the SAC boundary, and potential buffer area.





Why should we have a World Heritage Site for the Flow Country?

World Heritage Sites fall into three categories depending on the reason for their inscription – they are either Cultural, Natural or Mixed (i.e. having both cultural and natural attributes). For example New Lanark is a Cultural site, The Dorset and East Devon Coast (sometimes called the Jurassic Coast) is a natural site and St. Kilda is a mixed site. The Flow Country is being proposed as a natural site for its blanket bog habitat.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, more commonly known as UNESCO, judges potential World Heritage Sites against a range of criteria (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria>). Each site must prove that it has Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) for the particular feature(s) of importance, and justify this against at least one of the ten criteria. The Flow Country stakes claim to criteria ix and x; the former in recognition of the quality and extent of its blanket bog habitat and the latter in recognition of its species complement such as the significant breeding bird assemblages, and others such as the wide array of *Sphagnum* mosses and the Freshwater Pearl Mussel.

In making the case that The Flow Country has OUV, it needs to be shown that The Flow Country is vital not only to the two counties in which it sits, and to Scotland, the UK and Europe, but to the whole World.



What's involved in the process of becoming a World Heritage Site?

The process of applying for World Heritage Site status is neither short nor simple. While there are no guarantees of success for any application, there is evidence from other sites around the UK that the application process itself is highly beneficial in raising awareness of a site and promoting collaboration among stakeholders. As a first step a proposed site needs to be accepted onto its country's Tentative List of potential World Heritage Sites which is managed in the UK by the Government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The Flow Country went onto the UK tentative list in 1999 but it is only in relatively recent years that the next step has been taken.

The next step on the road to World Heritage Site status is submission of a Technical Evaluation, identifying the site's Outstanding Universal Value and its suitability as a World Heritage Site. This is submitted to the DCMS, who decide whether or not the technical evaluation makes the case sufficiently well that the Flow Country could proceed with a full application to UNESCO. Two Technical Evaluations have already been submitted by the Peatlands Partnership, for the proposed Flow Country site, in 2013 and 2015. Both were subsequently returned with feedback on areas requiring further work, but also along with encouragement to reapply.

In Autumn 2017 The Peatlands Partnership established a World Heritage Site Working Group with the key purpose of developing and submitting a successful Technical Evaluation as an essential step in realising the Flow Country as a World Heritage Site.

As part of this effort, we are running a far-reaching community consultation which will help us to integrate the ideas of the people of Caithness and Sutherland into our



application. This consultation will run from May 2019 – July 2019 and we intend to submit our Technical Evaluation to the DCMS by the end of September 2019.

What would a Flow Country World Heritage Site mean for me?

No two World Heritage Sites can be the same. The opportunities that come with World Heritage Site status are not uniform; indeed, the benefits of each site worldwide are unique and are shaped largely by how well local businesses and communities prepare for the opportunities that come with this status. With this in mind, it is impossible to say exactly what a World Heritage Site would bring to Caithness and Sutherland, but many similar properties around the world have taken advantage of the potential for branding, marketing and international recognition that comes with joining this prestigious club.

To help highlight what the potential opportunities are, we have included a few case studies which show how some of the World Heritage Sites in the UK have reaped the rewards of WHS status.

Case studies

Taking the **Dorset and East Devon Coast** (Jurassic Coast) World Heritage Site as a case study, the majority of holiday accommodation prominently advertises its proximity to the World Heritage Site on their websites, while a local ice cream producer has brought out a “Jurassic Range” in partnership with the Jurassic Coast Trust.



The Jurassic Coast Trust has guided the development of an industry-led guidebook for the region and has also produced a “Jurassic Coast Story Book” which is a fantastic free tool, helping educators to interpret the World Heritage Site to locals, schoolchildren and tourists alike.

New Lanark World Heritage Site offers further examples of how businesses can take advantage of the World heritage accolade; with a local ice cream company and hotel prominent among those utilising their World Heritage brand as a mark of quality.

Like many other World Heritage Sites, New Lanark welcomes many school groups every year and puts together specific tours and events to connect children to local heritage.

Blaenavon World Heritage Site runs a fantastic Youth Ambassadors Scheme, which connects young people in the area to their heritage and gives them the chance to get involved in the management of their World Heritage Site.

This scheme rewards youth ambassadors with fun days out and awards for their time volunteering at World Heritage events.

Economic and Social Impacts of a Flow Country World Heritage Site

While it is impossible to predict exactly the impact of a Flow Country World Heritage Site, below is a list of some of the expected benefits.

Partnership – Local residents and visitors could benefit indirectly through better



management of The Flow Country, World Heritage Site status has been seen to improve the level of partnership activity through the extensive consultation required to inscribe and then manage a Site.

Additional Funding – World Heritage Sites tend to be viewed more favourably by conservation and heritage-based funding sources. Local residents and visitors could benefit indirectly through increased local investment.

Tourism – Evidence from existing World Heritage Sites suggests a modest increase in visitor numbers, with the promotional advantages being greater in less well-known sites. Local communities could benefit both directly and indirectly from tourism generated by a WHS.

Civic Pride - World Heritage Site inscription has been cited as a mechanism for building local confidence and civic pride. This benefit plays into broader assumptions that a local World Heritage Site is associated with a higher quality of life.

Social Capital – World Heritage Site status is also recognised as encouraging social unity and cohesion, through providing opportunities for interaction and engagement with the local community.

Education and Learning – Visiting and local groups of students of all ages will be able to take advantage of a habitat recognised as the best of its type in the world. World Heritage Sites are considered to be good tools for learning. There may also be the potential to expand on the UHI/ERI presence in the north and, for example, have a specific WHS related peatland course/PhD series/Studentships.





Environmental Benefits of a Flow Country World Heritage Site

Conservation – There is potential for additional funding to either be leveraged or possibly generated by a World Heritage Site and some of this would be best used support the conservation and maintenance of the site's Outstanding Universal Value.

At the same time there would still be scrutiny of planning applications to ensure that any which could potentially have damaging effects on the World Heritage Site are managed carefully.

Have Your Say

While a Flow Country World Heritage Site would be recognised as having value to the whole world, this would be Caithness and Sutherland's World Heritage Site. It is very important that we work closely with communities at every stage of the World Heritage Site process, so we are looking for feedback from as many people as possible.

The Flow Country has experienced human influence for thousands of years and this landscape will continue to be affected by those fortunate enough to call it their home. We want to work with communities to see that The Flow Country continues to be a world-class habitat, as well as ensuring that local people feel the benefit of this highest of heritage accolades. Come and speak to us at one of the drop-in events in May or one of the three large events in July. Or log your comments via the Consultation Portal. Details for all of these follow.



We are holding 13 drop-in events around Caithness and Sutherland, all of which will have Working Group members on hand to answer your questions and receive your feedback... and there will be an ample supply of tea and biscuits!

We are also holding three much larger events where we hope to have guest speakers with direct involvement in World Heritage management in the UK and a wealth of knowledge about The Flow Country.

Drop-in Events

All events 11am–7pm, except Golspie (1pm–7pm)

14th May – Pultney Centre, Wick

15th May – Golspie Community Centre

16th May – Timespan, Helmsdale

17th May – Dunbeath Heritage Centre

20th May – Brora Community Centre

21st May – Lybster Community Centre

22nd May – Altnaharra Hotel

23rd May – Youth Club, Halkirk

24th May – Thurso Library

27th May – Lairg Community Centre

28th May – Strathy Village Hall

29th May – Tongue Village Hall

30th May – Kildonan Hall, Strath of Kildonan



Big Events

Friday 5th July – Lairg Community Centre

Saturday 6th July – Thurso High School

Sunday 7th July – Eden Court, Inverness

Highland Council Consultation Portal

The Highland Council has kindly offered to support the consultation through their main Consultation Portal. Use the link below to access this or search for it by name **The Flow Country World Heritage Site Project**

http://consult.highland.gov.uk/portal/environment/flow_country_whs/flow_country_whs

You will be asked to create an account and will then be able to share your views with us by clicking on the title “The Flow Country World Heritage Site Project”. If you have any trouble using our online consultation, please feel free to get in touch with Project Coordinator Joe Perry on: 07775411270 or via email on: joe.perry@highland.gov.uk



Photography:

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