



Overview of 2015

In this month-by-month 'diary' we set out some of the most significant milestones of 2015.

January

Project staff appointed. The start of the year commences with an announcement that The Peatlands Partnership has appointed four new staff to support project manager **Caroline Eccles**. The new faces are **Judith Crow** (Project Administrator), **Angela Simpson** (Community Engagement Officer), **Sjoerd Tel** (Learning Officer) and **Gearoid Murphy** (Peatlands Advisory Officer). Their collective task is to make the project's objectives a reality alongside colleagues at RSPB Forsinard Flows.

Eann Sinclair, programme manager for the Caithness and North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership (CNSRP), welcoming the appointments, says: *"I really welcome this project as it will further help to diversify the area's economy away from its current dependence on Dounreay decommissioning. CNSRP partners have provided support to elements of this exciting project, and we all look forward to seeing more good news like this over the coming years."*

February

Thurso-based O'Brien Construction wins the contract to build a new viewing tower which we have now called "The Flows Lookout", designed to provide elevated views across a natural area of bog pools near Forsinard.

Donald Chambers of O'Brien Construction, says, *"I am extremely pleased that we, a local firm, have won this contract and have the opportunity to make a contribution to this important project and the benefits it will bring to the area. Although only a small structure, the high level of environmental care being required and the location makes it quite an engineering challenge. We look forward to meeting the challenge and I am very confident that we will do the area proud."*

March

Film-makers Maramedia go on location in The Flow Country following the award of a commission to make a 30-minute documentary about the area. The company is best known for its very popular 4-part "Hebrides-Islands on the Edge" series that was broadcast to widespread acclaim by the BBC in 2014.

Executive Producer and company founder Nigel Pope says, *"We are truly delighted to have the opportunity to film in such a remarkable place. The Flow Country is a very special place with a distinct character and magic all of its own; our challenge will be to capture that magic on film."*

April

Construction of The Flows Lookout is underway. A helicopter is used to bring material to the site in order to prevent damage to the peatlands.

The project launches its new brand. This is designed to help increase recognition of the importance of the project and the habitat it seeks to restore.

May

Two contracts are awarded to develop better online promotion for The Flow Country. STEEL Edinburgh starts to develop a new website which will provide further information about the project, the global significance of The Flow Country, project news and forthcoming events.

Peel Interactive starts developing a digital model which will interpret the peatland landscape in a new and exciting way. Incorporating animation and a virtual fly-through, the model will also be developed into an interactive game. Both will be accessible from a new website in Spring 2016.

Six primary schools from Sutherland and Caithness enjoy some outdoor learning through the Alan Joyce Young Environmentalist Competition, delivered in partnership with Strathnaver Museum. Pupils learn about peatlands and rural life in the past, and are invited to submit a photo showing a connection to peatlands for the competition. Tongue Primary School win the overall photo competition.

June

The big news in June is the official opening of The Flows Lookout. Visitors take guided walks along the trail, see for themselves the impressive view from the Lookout, and consume lots of tea and cake! Councillor Linda Munro comments, *“I was incredibly impressed with the project. The quality of local workmanship is second to none and has been done with great sensitivity to the environment. The project will attract many new visitors to our area, but I also urge those who live here in Caithness and Sutherland, young and old, to come to Forsinard and see for themselves a unique view of our spectacular landscape.”*

Pupils from Reay Primary School and Hillhead Primary School are the first schools to visit the Lookout and learn about The Flow Country environment.

July

A summer season of special events continues as North Lands Creative Glass host an art workshop with Madeline Mackay, while staff from RSPB Scotland lead wildlife walks at the Forsinard Flows nature reserve. Other project partners, Highland Council Rangers and Plantlife International, lead more invigorating walks across The Flow Country. Inside, others get creative at a writing event with George Gunn, hosted by Dunbeath Heritage Centre. Poems, paintings and archive photographs are later on show at Caithness Horizons in Thurso to celebrate International Bog Day.

Artist Janice Duke completes a fabulous new mural at the RSPB's visitor centre at Forsinard.

Removal of timber, felled in Dyke plantation during the previous winter and spring, continues over the summer months. It is estimated that over five years the project will enable restoration of 1,825 hectares of peatland at RSPB Scotland's Forsinard Flows Reserve. This huge undertaking is designed to create the right conditions for the return of blanket bog to areas which had been badly damaged by the inappropriate planting of conifer plantations.

All the restoration work is monitored to see how effective the different techniques are and whether the special plants and animals are returning to the bog once the trees are taken away.

August

The pioneering vision of The Peatlands Partnership to make The Flow Country a centre of European research and innovation excellence takes a significant step forward. It is announced that Thurso-based contractor O'Brien Construction Ltd are to build the new field centre at Forsinard.

The £1.9m state-of-the-art field centre will offer accommodation and facilities for research students, long term volunteers and university groups to study peatlands in The Flow Country and

the effects of the ground-breaking peatland restoration techniques being led by RSPB Scotland, Forestry Commission Scotland and private land managers.

September

Funding is secured from the Scottish Natural Heritage Peatland Action Fund to restore 300 hectares of blanket bog on Welbeck Estate, Berriedale by reprofiling open drains and then blocking them with peat dams. This work will restore the natural water table in the peat, benefiting local biodiversity and maintaining the bogs carbon stock and also help reduce sedimentation of the Langwell Water which is important for spawning Atlantic salmon. The work is to be carried out by local contractor, John MacKay Ltd, from Halkirk who will use low ground pressure vehicles to carry out the work.

By way of a reward for winning the Alan Joyce Young Environmentalist Competition earlier in the year, pupils from Tongue Primary school enjoy a day in front of the camera at Moine House, while Maramedia filmed their afternoon of environmental education. Footage will be included in their Flow Country film which is due to be launched early in 2016.

October

The Peatlands Partnership invites local people with an interest in the future of the peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland to a special Peatlands Forum held in Lairg. It forms part of the 2015 Caithness and Sutherland “Peatlands Week”, to celebrate the International Year of Soils. The event is organised by Thurso-based Environmental Research Institute (ERI) which is part of the University of the Highlands and Islands. The Peatlands Forum is followed by a science conference, “Research in the Flow Country III: Taking Stock”, which takes place in Thurso.

Conference delegates visit an upland blanket bog undergoing restoration. The visit is organised by the project’s advisory officer Gearoid Murphy in partnership with Anson MacAuslan from Welbeck Estates. The visit shows the delegates a different aspect to The Flow Country than they may have seen before.

As the Forsinard Visitor Centre closes for the winter season, the people counter on the new Flows Lookout reveals that 2000 visitors have been up to have a look. The Lookout and new, accessible boardwalk are to remain open all year.

November

Star-gazers attending a special “Dark Skies” event at the Flows Lookout are rewarded with dazzling views of the Milky Way and the Northern Lights. Gordon Mackie and Maciej Winiarczyk of the Caithness Astronomy Group share their expert knowledge with an appreciative audience. Gordon Mackie says, *“The area around Forsinard is a wonderfully wild and dark location – a superb place to gaze skywards and take in the wonders of the universe.”*

December

Peatland Advisory Officer Gearoid Murphy ends the year having surveyed over 1,300 peatland drains across the eastern Flow Country and collected data such as drain width, depth and water flow. The information is to be used to develop restoration management plans for the bogs in these areas and to enable local landowners to apply for funding from the Scottish Rural Development Programme Agri-Environment and Climate Scheme. Meanwhile restoration work on Welbeck Estate has been completed with the blocking and reprofiling of approximately 60km of peatland drains. Despite the harsh weather conditions including snow and Storm Abigail the contractors, John MacKay Ltd, manage to complete the work on schedule.

The Flow Country Teacher Network gets off to a formal start with a presentation by Learning Officer Sjoerd Tel at Castletown Primary School. Teachers are to be involved in developing tools and lesson plans to incorporate the peatlands into the curriculum through outreach and the use of the online teaching resource called “Glow”.