



The Peatlands Partnership

Gaining a Perspective of the Flow Country

*In this article, **John Henderson, chairman of the Peatland Partnership**, explains the Partnership's plans for a Flow Country Observatory at Forsinard*

The Flow Country of Caithness and Sutherland covers about 1,500 square miles. It is an extraordinary place with a solemn grandeur all of its own. It is of international importance for its biodiversity and it plays an equally important function as a carbon store. But how many of us can claim to truly know it? And how can we attract more people to the area to experience and understand it? This is the challenge that the Peatland Partnership set itself.

Part of the challenge is the lack of accessibility. Despite its scale there are surprisingly few good vantage points in the Flow Country where the bogs generally sit above the strath roads. And yet getting into the Flows is fundamental to gaining a true feeling for this vast and beautiful area. The flat nature of this landscape also makes it difficult to gain the height necessary for a sense of perspective and a chance to see the iconic patterned pool systems that are a special feature of the Flow Country.

So how can we get people into the Flows without damaging the peatlands themselves?

Our answer to this challenge is a modest observatory, essentially a 7m tall structure, glazed below with an open upper-storey. It has been designed by an environmental award winning architectural practice and will be located close to the Forsinard Flows Visitor Centre on the RSPB's Dubh Lochan trail. Since 1997, this trail has already given over 50,000 children and visitors access to an area of bog pools .

There are many benefits of the observatory.

Firstly, the observatory will provide a wonderful new elevated vantage point providing previously unseen views over the pools and this is where you will get a real feel for the extent of the landscape and its intricate patterns. Combined with the presence of an upgraded Forsinard Flows visitor centre and train station it will make for a much more compelling visitor destination and should generate greater visitor numbers which may in turn create a number of business opportunities across the north. In addition to daytime use to view the peatlands, there is great potential of the observatory to become a "Dark Skies" site for stargazing and aurora watching.

Secondly, we will not have to create a new trail into the peatlands at another site. The Dubh Lochan Trail already exists, although we plan to create a second path to the Observatory to allow more people of different abilities to use it and enjoy the facilities at the end of the Trail.

Thirdly, the observatory will provide shelter from the elements for the school parties that regularly use the Dubh Lochan Trail as an outdoor classroom. It will also provide visitors with somewhere comfortable to enjoy the wonderful peatland habitat.

Fourthly, the observatory has a very small 'footprint' (only 5 metres in diameter) and will be built on piles so that it sits above the peat surface. This and the methods used for constructing it will minimise any damage to the peatland.

We believe the observatory is an imaginative and sensitive solution to the challenge of providing our visitors and schools with a memorable experience of the Flow Country.

John Henderson – Chairman, The Peatlands Partnership

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Notes

This is one in a series of articles where the Peatlands Partnership explains the details of the £9.6 million Flow to the Future project.

The Peatlands Partnership includes Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission (Scotland), Highland Council, RSPB Scotland, Plantlife International and The Environmental Research Institute. It liaises with local community groups, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, the Scottish Government's Rural Payments and Inspections

Directorate and the North Sutherland Community Forest Trust. It is independently chaired by John Henderson of Scrabster Farm, Caithness.

The Flows Observatory is part of the HLF funded Flow to the Future Project, it is being built thanks to support from European Regional Development Fund, Scottish Natural Heritage and RSPB Scotland.

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