



# NATURAL HIGH

GREEN TOURISM HAS GAINED CONSIDERABLE IMPETUS IN RECENT YEARS, BUT SCOTLAND REMAINS SOME WAY OFF ACHIEVING ITS WIDER GOAL OF BECOMING EUROPE'S PREMIER SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DESTINATION, WRITES RICHARD ROWE

SCOTLAND'S WORLD-CLASS NATURAL attractions are at last getting the attention they deserve – not just from visitors, but also those who market Scotland as a destination. Traditional pulls such as golf and whisky endure, but it is Scotland's landscape, wildlife and natural diversity that are an increasing draw for visitors.

And with many of them now having more demanding environmental expectations, outdoor businesses have been among the first to build 'green' credentials into the wider visitor experience.

But, in truth, the incorporation of environmental protection into businesses is nothing new for many outdoor operators. There has always been a small group of people working in the outdoor activity arena that have pursued such thinking, comments Stevie Christie, a Director at Edinburgh-based adventure travel company Wilderness Scotland. The frustration in the past was that the approach was not always shared at national and tourist board level.

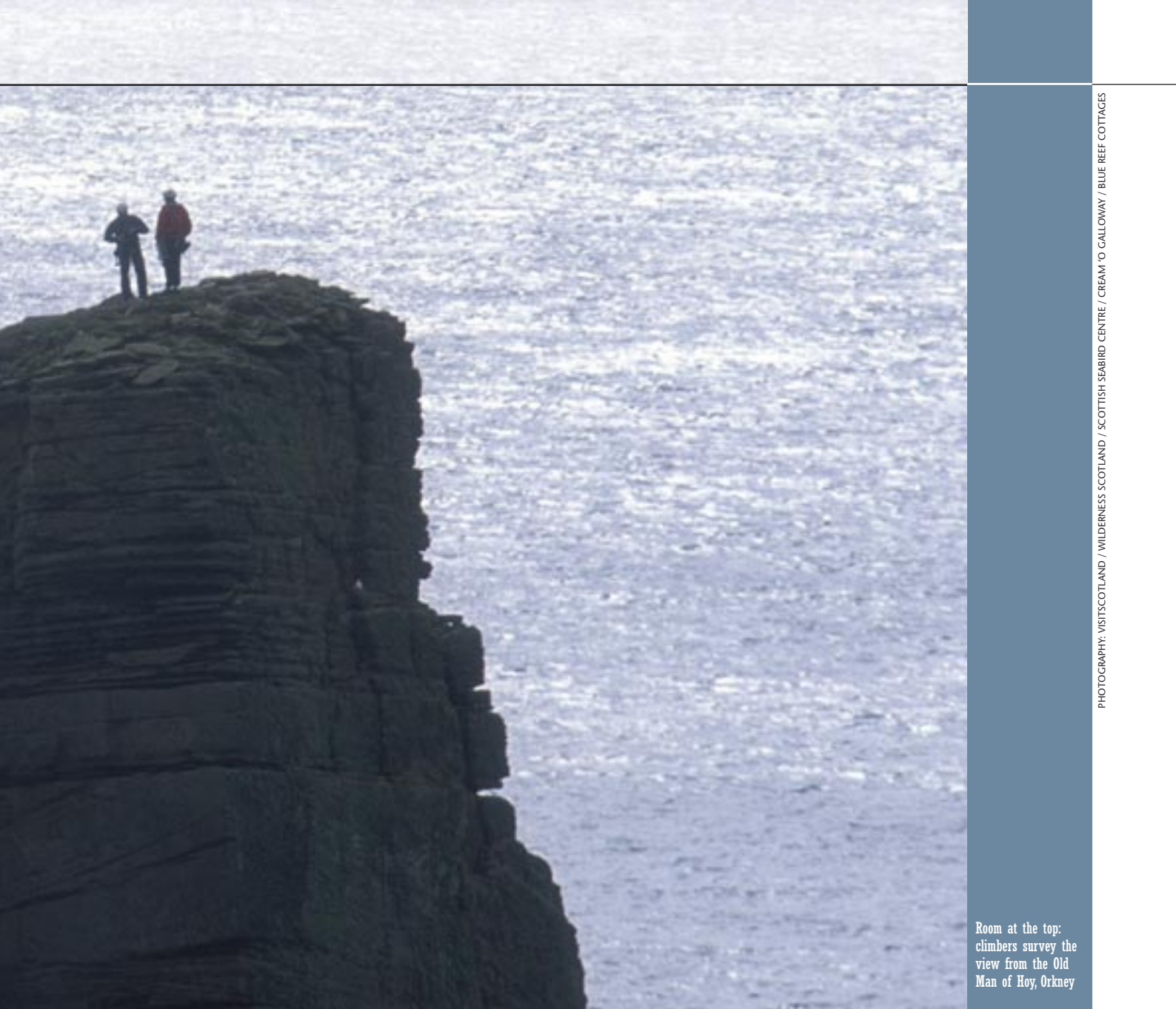
However, that appears to be changing as the mainstream catches up with what might best be described as green tourism best practice. "Often it is the smaller businesses that have grabbed the mettle and really moved forward, although it is encouraging to see the likes of the Mac-

donald Hotel and Radisson SAS groups looking at this more closely," comments Christie.

There is definitely more momentum, agrees Dorothy Breckenridge, co-owner of walking tour operator C-N-Do Scotland, based in Stirling. "Green tourism is becoming more mainstream as part of a wider sustainable development concept," she says. "Importantly, the public sector is now demonstrating itself to be more supportive at a strategic level."

The change has been striking, notes Lynda Dalgleish, who moved into the tourism sector in 2001 when she took over marketing of the Scottish Seabird Centre in North Berwick. "To be frank, there was very little interest from the Executive or VisitScotland in the concept of wildlife or green tourism," she says. "However, while Scotland was initially slow to respond, the change since then has been rapid."

Of course, so-called green tourism is not always necessarily sustainable tourism – something that Sandy Dear from VisitScotland's Sustainable Tourism Unit is quick to point out. "There are examples of green tourism that are not sustainable at all," he comments. "Green tourism can exploit pristine habitats that may not have



Room at the top: climbers survey the view from the Old Man of Hoy, Orkney

been visited by tourists before, while some tourists may use high impact means of travel to reach these special habitats.”

As such, Dear cautions against getting too wrapped up in marketing speak, suggesting that terms such as ‘green’, ‘eco’ and ‘wildlife’ tourism are essentially just brands. Instead, it is better to focus on words like ‘responsible’ and ‘sustainable’ – strategic terms describing a long-term approach that marries economic success with a healthy environment and thriving communities.

Dagleish would argue that this is exactly what the Seabird Centre has offered since opening in 2000 with a mission to inspire people to understand and care for the natural environment. Some two million people have since visited the centre – all without disturbing the environment they have come to see, she adds.

As evidence of Scotland’s long-term commitment in this area, Dear points to the Scottish Executive’s unveiling in 2006 of a 10-year Tourism Framework for Change document that laid down the challenge of making Scotland the most sustainable tourism destination in Europe – although quite how that can be meaningfully measured is still to be determined.

### **FILLING THE COFFERS**

The economic importance of outdoor tourism to Scotland is clear, with walking making a particularly significant financial contribution. Latest figures from VisitScotland indicate that walking was an activity undertaken by almost 5 million UK visitors to Scotland, generating more than £1 billion in revenue. Meanwhile, adventure sports (excluding mountain biking) are worth some £144 million to the Scottish economy.

In other sectors, VisitScotland says that wildlife watching now pulls in approximately £160 million nationwide each year. Research work into sea eagles on Mull alone is thought to generate some £6 million for the local economy.

The ability of such tourism to bring social and economic benefits to isolated communities should not be underestimated, says Christie at Wilderness Scotland. He points to the Knoydart peninsula, a remote area that the company has taken upwards of 500 people to in small groups over the years. “During that time, we have made a positive impact economically, with the peninsula’s well-being now far more aligned with environmentally focused tourism,” he says.

◀ The key is that a relatively small amount of money can go a long way in remote areas, adds Breckenridge. "For instance, if we take 12 people to Torridon, Harris, or Durness for one week three times each summer, then that is a good spend locally," she says. "Money spent with local services is often recycled many times over. And if it is out of season then even better."

Meanwhile, Robin Worsnop, Managing Director of Rabbie's Trail Burners, points to the number of bed nights his company brings to Portree on Skye. "We put up to £500,000 a year into the town, giving rise to 10 full time jobs or equivalents," he says. "We don't just pass through: we put bed nights into communities and so customers spend locally, too."

The effectiveness of taking a green approach is also reflected in successful small-scale operations, such as Blue Reef Cottages – two luxury, turf-roofed buildings near Scarista on Harris – and Cream o' Galloway, an organic farm near Gatehouse of Fleet that now attracts nearly 7,000 people each year.

"We have always attracted those who enjoy the outdoors, but are increasingly aware that some people are seeking us out because of our organic and fairtrade principles," explains Helen Fenby, Visitor Centre Manager at Cream o' Galloway. "One message many of our visitors go home with is how organic food production makes a positive difference to the environment, improves habitat for wildlife and reduces land and water pollution."

And then there is Wild Scotland, an association of wildlife and nature tourism operators that promotes Scotland as Europe's premier wildlife tourist destination. Since its formation in 2003, membership has more than tripled to 70 members, covering everything from marine- and land-based wildlife tour operators to conservation-minded estates such as Balmoral and Rothiemurchus.

"There were many operators taking people out to see wildlife before Wild Scotland came about," explains Wild Scotland Manager, Caroline Warburton. "However, a number of these operators felt that wildlife should have a

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Surf and turf: fine Hebridean views from Blue Reef Cottages on Harris (right)



Wild wonders: wildlife watching on Islay (left); sea kayaking at sunset (above left); the Scottish Seabird Centre in North Berwick (above right)

higher profile in the tourism industry and they came together to form the association. More companies are joining each year and we are also seeing new wildlife companies starting up, which is excellent."

In addition to benefiting from the marketing activities of Wild Scotland, members sign up to a 'charter' that outlines a responsible commitment to protecting the nature that they rely upon for their business. "Customers know that Wild Scotland membership is an indicator of quality assurance for wildlife tourism," says Warburton.

But the biggest success story so far has been the Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS) – an initiative at the heart of a drive for change by tourism providers generally in Scotland. Launched in 1997, the GTBS is now the UK's leading sustainable tourism certification scheme with more than 1,700 members – half of them in Scotland. These range from small bed and breakfasts to high-end hotels as well as visitor centres, outdoor activity and wildlife tour operators.

Businesses opting to join the scheme are graded against



## GREEN INITIATIVES

Scotland's efforts to promote sustainable green tourism will be accelerated by the launch of two specific environmental initiatives. VisitScotland has developed Going Green, a programme designed to ease businesses into the Green Tourism Business Scheme, while the private sector-led Tourism Innovation Group (TiG) is putting the finishing touches to Climate Change Scotland (CCS), a carbon-balancing project that allows Scottish tourism businesses to make a link between their activities and the impact on carbon emissions.

According to TiG, the scheme helps tourism businesses reduce their direct and indirect emissions and then counter-balance those that are unavoidable through a donation to projects in Scotland that have a specific carbon 'win'. It also offers a range of environmental, social, community and educative benefits, says TiG.

For more information on these and other efforts to develop more sustainable tourism practices, visit:

- **CLIMATE CHANGE SCOTLAND**  
[www.climatechangescotland.com](http://www.climatechangescotland.com)
- **TOURISM INNOVATION GROUP**  
[www.tourisminnovation.com](http://www.tourisminnovation.com)
- **GREEN TOURISM BUSINESS SCHEME**  
[www.green-business.co.uk](http://www.green-business.co.uk)
- **WILD SCOTLAND**  
[www.wild-scotland.org.uk](http://www.wild-scotland.org.uk)
- **VISITSCOTLAND SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS UNIT**  
[www.greentourism.org.uk](http://www.greentourism.org.uk)

a set of criteria that includes energy and water efficiency, biodiversity and waste management. If businesses meet the required standard, they are then graded Bronze, Silver or Gold depending on their level of achievement.

"Importantly, the GTBS is demonstrating that tourism is an extremely broad church and encourages an ethos of ethical change," says Breckenridge at C-N-Do, whose own company has a Gold award.

According to GTBS Managing Director, Andrea Nicholas, the scheme saw steady year-on-year growth to begin with, but demand has increased greatly over the past two years or so. "It has gone ballistic and membership has doubled during that time," she says.

Nicholas believes that green tourism has become much more mainstream – as evidenced by the GTBS now being recognised internationally. "Something first pioneered in Scotland has now spread and the UK leads the way in green tourism accreditation worldwide," she says.



### EARLY DAYS

Even so, these remain early days in the development of green tourism in Scotland with, it could be argued, a relatively small number of businesses making a disproportionate amount of noise. Scotland lags far behind, say, Scandinavia, Germany and other countries where green thinking is a given rather than something that needs to be actively marketed.

"In Scandinavian countries, people are living and breathing it," says Breckenridge. "Here, we still have a long way to go in terms of integrating the whole philosophy. Ethical business should underpin everything. It is about having respect for people, the landscape and the environment while running your business."

Encouragingly, Nicholas says the GTBS is busy bringing additional auditors on stream as it seeks to cope with the increased demand from businesses for grading. As a not-for-profit operation and with no core funding, resources can be an issue, she admits. It is very much a chicken and egg situation: the GTBS needs more businesses to join before it can add resources to serve those businesses better.



although interestingly more so south of the border, reports Nicholas.

Meanwhile, discussions continue about the incorporation of green credentials into the existing star-graded quality assurance scheme for tourism providers – a move that would go some way towards actually measuring sustainability.

Christie would also like to see more active promotion of wildlife, walking and other low-impact activities. Currently, activity tours are only marketed in the UK so the overseas image of Scotland is closer to the tried and tested whisky, castles and golf. Such an approach, he feels, squanders an opportunity to establish Scotland alongside other world-class destinations for adventure travel.

“You think about a country like New Zealand and the immediate reaction is: the outdoors. That’s just not the case here, although it should be,” he comments.

Others call for more fundamental hurdles to be addressed, such as public transport. It’s all very well promoting sustainable tourism, but the idea falls down if the lack of public transport means the only way to access remoter areas is by car, suggests Breckenridge. “In many areas, it is difficult to put a bike on the back of a bus, or even take a bike on trains,” she says. “Transport and tourism must work hand in hand.”

Similarly, Scotland has some difficult decisions to make about how to develop tourism on the margins of Europe; the conflict between the increase in direct flights for short city breaks and Scotland’s sustainable objectives are clear.

“Maybe we just need to start looking closer to home at people who can travel here in more sustainable ways,” says Worsnop. “There is a massive market south of the border that remains untapped.”

What is clear is that as consumer awareness – and expectation – about environmental performance increases, so tourism in general will have to raise its collective game. “I see a tipping point where consumers will demand this,” says Worsnop. “Otherwise, they will just go elsewhere.” ■

Such additional manpower will be needed if the GTBS is to meet ambitious government targets for all businesses in Scotland to have some kind of green grading by 2018 – and 3,000 by 2010. “The more people join the scheme, the more realistic this will be, although we do need better marketing of the business benefits of going down this route,” says Nicholas.

Wilderness Scotland, which also has a Gold GTBS award, is doing its bit – although it does not always get entirely positive feedback. “We wrote to suppliers encouraging them to get accreditation,” says Christie. “Many said that they were interested in principle, but were put off by the cost. Several are small businesses who felt that if they had money to spare they would spend it on solar panels or something else, not on having someone tell them that they have solid green credentials – something they already know.”

So, what to do? The key, believes Christie, is to make it easier – and cheaper – for businesses to highlight their green credentials. According to Robin Worsnop at Rabbie’s, it should also be about developing a more emotional attachment to the ethos of going green rather than just highlighting opportunities for cost savings. This is beginning to happen,



Green thinking: wind turbine at Cream ‘o Galloway (top left); cloud inversion in the Highlands (bottom left); coming ashore at Doune, Knoydart (bottom right)