

## **GALLOWAY AND SOUTHERN AYRSHIRE BIOSPHERE RESERVE**

Visit to Cevennes National Park and Biosphere: 2 – 6 November 2007

### **Background**

1. Scottish Natural Heritage together with East and South Ayrshire Councils, Dumfries and Galloway Council and Forestry Commission Scotland are considering the possibility of re-designating the three current UNESCO designated Biosphere Reserves in South West Scotland ( Merrick Kells, Silver Flowe and Cairnsmore of Fleet) under new criteria for biospheres as part of a broader review of the designation nationally. A Steering Group of the five agencies has been formed to explore the concept.
2. Originally designated in 1976, the UNESCO designation added an international recognition to the three areas of outstanding natural heritage value but did little else. A new form of biosphere designation introduced by UNESCO in 1995 places more emphasis on sustainable development and the involvement of local people in adjacent areas. In seeking to explore this concept further a study was commissioned to engage key potential stakeholders and communities in discussions on possible ways forward.
3. Given that biosphere reserves have not been an easy concept to understand a key element of the study was to take potential key players and community champions to see an example of a “working” biosphere - if there was sufficient support for the idea within communities and stakeholders in general after a broad consultation exercise. As a result of a limited but general public support from local communities and businesses for the concept a visit to the Cevennes National Park and Biosphere was arranged by the consultants.
4. The visit took place between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> November 2007 and was attended by 14 people representing local councils (two senior councillors from both East and South Ayrshire Councils), local community councils and community initiatives, two members of the business community, two council officers (including the Chair of the Steering Group) and the study consultants.

### **Purpose of Visit**

5. As the visit was to be undertaken by people with varying knowledge levels of biospheres the purpose of the trip covered a variety of aspects.

To learn more about biospheres as a concept;

To gain experience of how a biosphere operates;

To meet local government politicians, local government officers, project officers and community representatives whose task is to develop the biosphere.

To learn from local people about aspects of living in the biosphere;

To identify examples of possible biosphere-type projects that might be applicable in SW Scotland;

To inspire potential project champions ready to assist in the process of taking a biosphere in SW Scotland forward; and

To foster potential links between community groups in Ayrshire and Galloway and between SW Scotland and the Cevennes.

### **Main Aspects of Visit**

6. The key elements of the visit were:

#### Saturday

Arrival at Montpellier, journey to, and orientation in, St Jean du Gard (study tour base). Tour accompanied throughout by Didier Lecuyer, Biosphere Officer for Cevennes and Sandra his wife, a local teacher and fluent English/French translator.

Presentation by Biosphere Officer in Cevennes National Park on the history, significance and designation of the national park and the biosphere and the natural environment characteristics that make area special.

Evening visit to *Festival Stevenson* in St Jean du Gard, a celebration of a long distance walking route made famous by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1879 in his book "Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes". This is a major local tourist initiative linked to walking in the Cevennes and after a presentation by the President of *L'Association Stevenson* an interesting discussion ensued on the possible links that might be developed between SW Scotland and the Cevennes. The Stevenson and Scottish themes were apparent throughout the town in bars, restaurants and shops – and in tartan clad and heather carrying walkers!

#### Sunday

Visit to, and presentation about *Terroir Cevennes* at Thoiras, a co-operative retail outlet run by the local farming community where 38 local producers of food, wine and crafts sell their produce.

The retail outlet provided a focus for the development of an adjacent community facility and the headquarters of the local ranger service and tourist office. An example of integrated service delivery to a village on a tourist route that had resulted in other spin offs in terms of an adjacent ceramics factory/retail outlet and an increase in *gites*/B&Bs in the area.

Afternoon visit to the complete restoration of an isolated hamlet (St. Germain de Calberte) as *gites*/B&B/restaurant in the high Cevennes that had become a model for sustainable tourism. Largely self-sufficient the location is now promoted by World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

Village also is centre for teaching the traditional craft of drystone walling. Presentation by *Artisans Batisseurs en Pierres Seches* on the various techniques used in the area. Association has developed a strong local industry to promote the restoration of the typical agricultural terracing – a key landscape feature of the area, vital to assist water run off in periods of heavy rain and provide fire breaks in extensive forest cover.

### Monday

Visit to Galeizon Valley, the main pilot project area for biosphere development in the Cevennes. Formed as an Inter-Council community driven project by the five key communities in the valley to drive forward the key aspects of the UNESCO programme for biospheres.

Visit to restoration of traditional silk weavers house in the Galeizon Valley with traditional silk lofts for cultivating silkworms surrounded by chestnut orchards. Owner used as reference point for aspiring developers of the traditional house. House used as a basis for very good local design guide for restoring traditional houses in the valley. Discussion on impact of biosphere on local people/communities and the problems associated with repopulating isolated houses/hamlets.

Visit to Galeizon Valley project office in Cendras. Talk by project officer on the main outputs of the project (see Appendix) and the development of a scientific observatory for recording data on species impact and progress on sustainability. Focus of project was the sustainable management of the river to avoid catastrophic floods including habitat development for European beaver.

Visit to River Galeizon to see river management activity both for natural environment and tourism and leisure opportunities.

Through chestnut forests to the top of a local hill with expansive views over whole of biosphere. Discussion on management issues surrounding biosphere and the social impacts of promoting a biosphere on an area of rural depopulation with large numbers of second homes.

Return to Cendras to meet Mayor of Cendras and President of Inter-Council Committee. Interesting discussion on the politics surrounding the development of the biosphere project area in the context of a much more complex French political system – with four levels of bureaucracy involved. Key messages were:

The biosphere encouraged people and communities to get together to bring about positive change in their local area;

The biosphere concept enabled leverage of funding across a wide spectrum of agencies, without a separate resource stream of itself;

To succeed the biosphere must have a strong community input and a clear vision; and

Biospheres are not a short term expedient; they require time, patience and skill.

This pilot project has resulted in spin-off projects based on similar principles in other parts of the Cevennes.

Evening return to Montpellier.

## **Conclusions**

7. There are strong similarities between the Cevennes and proposed Galloway/Southern Ayrshire Biospheres including:

Recent loss of coalmining and textile industries

Loss of young people from rural communities and an aging population

Urgent need to diversify the agricultural base

Over reliance on tourism and the problem of second homes

Many issues surrounding climate change affecting the natural environment that in turn impacts on local communities

Opportunity to add value to local heritage and culture

Many businesses focused on locally produced food and drink

In addition East Ayrshire Council has twinning links with Ales the largest town in the immediate area at the head of the Galeizon Valley.

8. Having said that direct comparison between the Cevennes Biosphere and any potential biosphere in SW Scotland is hampered by the fact that the Cevennes National Park covers roughly the same area, and the Biosphere is embedded with that structure with consequential spin-offs in terms of staff and resources. This would not be replicated in SW Scotland. Nevertheless there are key conclusions that can be drawn:

Although a difficult concept to grasp, the potential of a designation that unites the world's special places for natural environment is a potentially very strong brand image for an area;

A successful biosphere is dependent on community involvement and ties well into the development of a vibrant and focused community planning process;

A biosphere designation is an important way of engaging local communities in thinking about sustainable development and their place in the natural environment;

Although there is no funding from UNESCO, biosphere designations will prioritise other agency funding streams – particularly those targeting an integrated approach to rural development (important for SW Scotland in the context of SRDP/Leader);

A biosphere brings no new regulations or restrictions;

There are real prospects of economic regeneration through the co-operative marketing of nature based tourism, food and crafts particularly when locally based businesses are given control of projects and are encouraged to produce high quality goods and services;

It is important not to define a biosphere area too closely. It would seem preferable to have a wide variety of natural environment types and designations united by a loose association and underpinned by a collective vision, and with each component playing to their different strengths, rather than a narrowly defined biosphere based on a single entity;

A rigorous science-based approach to the natural environment is required which, if tied to a broader community planning and management approach required for biospheres, gives added impetus to a sustainable approach to community planning.

9. Biosphere Reserves – and the term is disliked in the Cevennes as much as it is here – are a possible way of engaging councils and local communities in bringing about sustainable community planning and management. About engaging those communities to understand the inter-action between what they do, how they live their lives and the impact that has on the natural environment. The benefits of a biosphere will therefore vary from one place to another, and over time, as their realisation is dependent on the capacity of local stakeholders to take ownership. Many of the principles can and should be applied in normal working practices, but the biosphere designation in the Cevennes seems to have given added impetus to the development of integrated rural community based initiatives and a deeper understanding of the natural environment often with minimal cost.

## **APPENDIX**

Summarised and translated notes from the Action Plan of the *Syndicat Mixte D'Amenagement et de Conservation de la Vallee du Galeizon* (Galeizon Valley Pilot Project)

### **The Cevennes Biosphere Reserve**

- Approved by Unesco in 1985, managed by the Cevennes National Park (core area :91000 hectares, boundary zone :237000 hectares).
- Includes the whole of the chestnut groves (chatalgnerie).
- No particular constraints (aucune reglementation particuliere).
- Enables closer links between conservation, development, research, education and training locally whilst participating in an international network. Examples of area planning which combine sustainable development (developpement durable) and conservation are encouraged leading to a more harmonious management of natural resources.

### **The Galeizon Project**

The Galeizon Valley was chosen as a pilot site because it is a small, well defined valley. There are also a number of different areas which could be worked upon; agriculture in the valley (shepherds (berger), cereals, market gardening ( maraichage), herds of goats, chestnut groves ), a forest which is a great fire risk, a rich natural environment needing to be protected, the pressure on the valley of the increasing amount of tourists, a small, fragile river where local people come to swim in summer, but leave litter.

### **The Galeizon Valley**

A small valley of 8300 hectares. Highest point is 924 metres. There are five villages in the valley ; Cendras (2000 inhabitants), Lamelouze (100 inhabitants), St. Paul La Coste (100 inhabitants), and Soustelle (100 inhabitants), in the Gard department and St. Martin de Boubaux (100 ) in the Lozere.

The natural heritage is especially marked by the river Galeizon, the cultural heritage by the Benedictin Abbey in Cendras(10th century), and the Bronze Age engravings on the Mortissou Mountain.

### **The Problems posed:**

- the development of local tourism ( from Ales ) which brings problems for the river (litter, pollution ) but little or no financial gains ;
- precarious farming conditions;
- a Mediterranean forest which is threatened by fires made worse by the fact that the forest is neglected;
- problems of lack of employment and services which could result in a desertification of the valley, or turn it into a dormitory valley or leisure area for the nearest town;
- high quality architecture which is degraded by modern buildings which do not respect the local architecture;
- a highly interesting natural and cultural heritage which needs to be conserved

These questions and many others were considered during a six month period of reflection in 1991.

## **Organisation of the reflection period**

The Cevennes Biosphere Reserve decided, in the spring of 1991, to proceed along three main lines of reflection. Local councillors, the associations in the valley, and representatives of the main administrations and organisations were involved in this reflection.

The themes discussed were:

- agriculture and forestry;**
- tourism and heritage;**
- employment and services.**

Financed by Minister of the Environment and the French MAB committee.

-Brought out an action plan and decided to create an **inter council syndicate** to manage the plan.

## **The Action Plan**

1. Create employment
2. Improve housing
3. Maintain and develop shops and services
4. Support local associations
5. Facilitate communications
6. Develop agriculture
7. Develop forestry
8. Fight against fires
9. Manage tourist development
10. Preserve and /or enhance the heritage
11. Manage the river

The Galeizon Valley needs coordinated effort to develop and conserve its rich heritage. The MAB programme provides a framework for reflection and work harmonising conservation and development.