

Caerlaverock National Nature Reserve Fifty years young

Partnership, sustainability and biodiversity are familiar terms which embody the thinking behind many organisations concerned with the future of our natural heritage today. Indeed these three words encompass much of the work of the Solway Firth Partnership. However fifty years ago, their mutually understood meaning was not common currency between conservation, farming, fishing and sporting interests, who held seemingly polarised views of the natural world and a mistrust of each others' motives.

In the mid 1950's the barnacle goose population on the Solway was between 1,000 and 1,500 and exploitation of the area's natural resources was largely un-regulated. The future of the Solway and wider countryside was not reckoned to be a high priority by many who worked or pursued leisure interests in the area. However one man had the vision to bring these parties together in the spirit of co-operation which today we would recognise as partnership working, to create a sustainable future for our biodiversity. "I wanted to allow all parties to continue to enjoy their pursuits ... I made an agreement with the Nature Conservancy to divide the merse (saltmarsh) into a sanctuary for wildlife and an area where controlled shooting would be allowed."

These are the words of the late Duke of Norfolk in 1957, owner of Caerlaverock Estate. This was a visionary approach in the 1950's and led to the establishment of the Caerlaverock National Nature Reserve (NNR). A similar agreement was formalised with the Earl of Mansfield on the adjacent Comlongon Estate and further lease of the foreshore from the Crown Estate Commissioners, together with an additional area of merse at Moss side, means that today the Reserve covers nearly 8,000 hectares of inter-tidal mud, sand and merse.

This model of zoning activities and regulation for sustainable harvesting of the Reserve's resources is one which has been copied across the world and over the intervening years, has been improved upon on a far wider scale. This tried and tested model has its origins in a pragmatic approach to conservation of the natural heritage. Wildfowling was to be managed through a permit system with a specified area, timing and number of wildfowlers permitted on the Reserve. This was, and still is, overseen by the Caerlaverock Panel, with representatives from the landowner, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) (formerly the Nature Conservancy Council), and from the body representing shooting interests, the Wildfowlers Association of Great Britain and Ireland (WAGBI), now the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC). SNH provide the Chair and Secretariat to the Panel and this basic model is copied on many of the famous wildfowl reserves and shooting areas across the UK.



Shelduck © Mark Pollitt

To assume that the establishment of the Reserve was universally welcomed would be naive, but the doubters were persuaded to work with former adversaries to ensure the future of their own interests and the Caerlaverock area. Without patient behind the scenes work by a few dedicated people, the establishment of the National Nature Reserve would have faltered. Even today, people often ask how such seemingly irreconcilable activities can coexist. "You actually allow people to shoot and fish over the Reserve?". One word - sustainability, describes how this can and does work.

An essential part of this successful co-operation rests with the Reserve staff who, over the years, through their knowledge, understanding, enthusiasm and diplomacy, have been the glue which has held the partnership together. There have been some humorous occasions, with one Reserve Manager on a warm summer's day having to explain in English to a group of German tourists that they should put their clothes back on as Caerlaverock was a nature reserve! Poachers used to be common and the story is told of the driver of the local baker's van who came across a Landrover full of tweedie men bristling with guns near the Reserve. Thinking they were up to no good and trying to

avert trouble he advised them to take care as “yon bloody auld Duke o’ Norfolk’s about”. In dignified tones came the reply “That’s quite alright, I am the bloody old Duke of Norfolk”.

So what has this effort and vision achieved? It would be easy to see the establishment of the Reserve as an end in itself, but this was not the purpose for which it was set up. The Reserve encompasses one of the largest continuous areas of saltmarsh in the UK - the largest in Scotland. The Svalbard barnacle goose population has increased to approximately 25,000. This is supported by the Barnacle Goose Management Scheme which pays farmers and provides advice on how to manage safe feeding areas and minimise conflict with agriculture on surrounding farmland.

The population of natterjack toads, one of Britain’s rarest animals on the north western edge of its range, has increased and extended over the Reserve and inland fields. This has been achieved through careful management of feeding habitat and creation of breeding pools. Grazing of the merse under a Merse Management Scheme similarly provides support and encourages farmers to continue traditional grazing methods. Summer grazing helps maintain habitat for grazing wildfowl and breeding waders whilst supporting the diverse flora which make up this unusual and extreme environment. Changes in wintering patterns of geese have seen a decline in the number of greylag geese, but an increase in the number of pink footed geese using the Reserve.

Redshank, lapwing and oystercatcher all breed on the Reserve, with skylarks, from which Caerlaverock (castle of the lark) takes its name, breeding in high numbers. Otters are routinely seen and increasingly, birds such as little egret and marsh harrier have become regular visitors. The huge winter, spring and autumn passage of flocks of waterfowl, for which the Reserve is famous, continue to provide an unparalleled wildlife spectacle. The carpet of colour of thrift, sea lavender and sea aster are important features of the merse throughout the summer and stands of the rare holy grass, a specialised coastal grass, thrive on the Reserve. Natural coastal processes of erosion of the merse occur alongside areas developing pioneer saltmarsh. It is this transition through a range of habitats, from the open estuary, sand and mud, through the pioneer and established saltmarsh, to the freshwater marsh and dry grassland at the landward edge of the Reserve, which is of particular importance.

Nature reserves were once seen as areas in which wildlife could thrive protected from interference by people. As someone once said, “it would be a grim world for those of us on the outside of the fence”. What is nature conservation if not for people? Opportunities for everyone to enjoy the wildlife spectacle that is

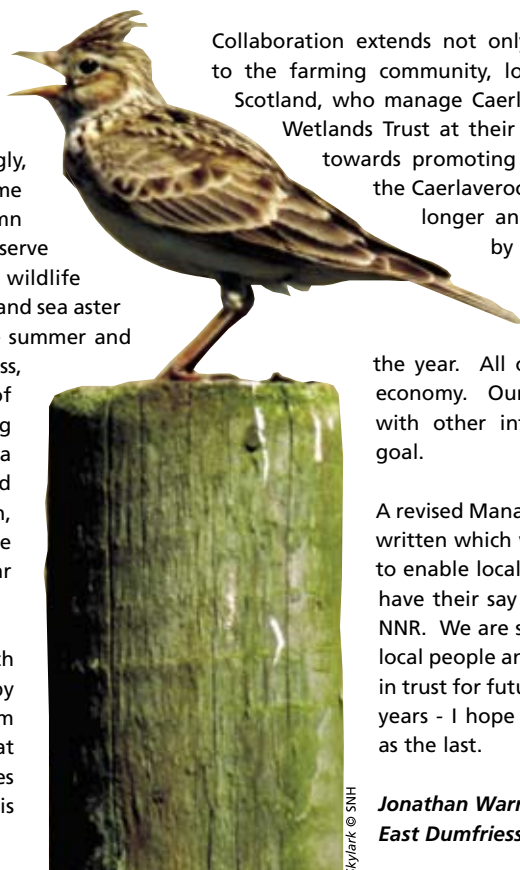
Caerlaverock have been central to the Reserve since its inception, attracting 30,000 visitors a year.

The 50th Anniversary of the declaration of the Reserve this year is not an opportunity to rest on the success of the past, but to look to the future. Raising national awareness is a key priority for the Reserve and improvements to access and viewing opportunities are currently being carried out. Providing specialised management and encouraging research and demonstration of best practise are important objectives. Both research and management on the Reserve require us to take a long-term view, so it is important that management continuity is assured. We have recently renewed the Nature Reserve Agreement with the late Duke of Norfolk’s daughters, Lady Anne Herries and Lady Mary Mumford, which ensures the continuity and support we have enjoyed to date. We are about to embark on the declaration of an extension of the Reserve into Carse Bay in an area we have leased from the Crown Estate for some years and this will clearly define the boundary of the Reserve. Byelaws have operated on the Reserve since its declaration, but have been something of a blunt instrument. We will however, through consultation, be issuing revised and streamlined byelaws designed to regulate activities which fall outwith other areas of legislation. This will enable sustainable wildfowling and responsible recreational activities to continue in the ongoing spirit of co-operation.

Collaboration extends not only to the owners of the Reserve, but to the farming community, local businesses and residents, Historic Scotland, who manage Caerlaverock Castle, and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust at their adjacent centre. We are all working towards promoting the natural and cultural heritage of the Caerlaverock area and encouraging visitors to stay longer and explore more widely. Winter visits by birdwatchers and wildfowling support local accommodation providers and other businesses and help maintain vibrant communities throughout the year. All of this has benefits for the local rural economy. Our aim is to complement, not compete with other interests, to work towards a common goal.

A revised Management Plan and Reserve Story is being written which will be sent out for public consultation to enable local communities and interested parties to have their say in shaping the future of Caerlaverock NNR. We are seeking even greater involvement from local people and visitors to the Reserve which we hold in trust for future generations. Here’s to the next fifty years - I hope and believe they will be as rewarding as the last.

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Skylark © SNH



Pond Dipping at Caerlaverock NNR © SNH