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The Role of Museum Natural History in Interpreting and Protecting the Environment: An Outsiders View

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The primary concern of this article is to discuss methodology rather than interpretive techniques. It will examine the proposition that museum natural history will gain a new role which will make a major contribution to protecting our environment; one of enabling and empowering communities, rather than display and interpretation alone. Despite a new direction, this approach must be based on traditional museum qualities of research and preservation.

It might seem strange that an archaeologist should seek to address the subject of natural history interpretation, especially through a specialist journal. However, as a manager I have worked on a number of natural history projects, and in my career have worked in a museum service run by a natural historian, Norman Atkinson in Angus, where the environment was given a high profile. It was there I began to appreciate the size of the audience for natural history and the level of support for it "out there".

The overall picture, as I see it, is as follows. As in the archaeological world there are a number of publicly funded organisations with specific remits. From an outsiders point of view these seem reasonably well funded, although I am sure that those inside or with greater knowledge than I would not concur. Next, and this is its great strength, there are a large number of committed amateur groups, many at the forefront of research and recording. These include a large body of "semi-professionals" who do much of the biological recording in the UK.

However there is not an opportunity for the casually interested person to interface with the subject. It seems to me, as such a person, the only way to get more than superficial information is to make a commitment by joining one of the "semi-professional" bodies. It may be that this is just a marketing problem, that the opportunities exist but are not clearly signposted. However, I believe that it is deeper than that, and it is this that I wish to address.

Current Approaches

I will discuss current approaches, and suggest that they are not making the most of opportunities, and then go on to suggest that the approach which will succeed in the Highlands is one which will fully involve communities, and indeed empower them, and finally, suggest how this might be achieved.

There is such a plethora of professional organisations involved in interpreting the environment that a fully coordinated approach is impossible. Nor need such an approach be a good thing. I believe that the variety of different standpoints of the various organisations could lead to a healthy mix of approaches, but this will only happen if each allows for the existence of others, and communicates about their intentions. The current level of suspicion and protectionism that characterises many of the workings in the Highlands can only lead to duplication and a reduction in quality. Organisations must be aware of what each of the others does. I think that it is an indictment, and I use that strong word deliberately, that the DONE Report (Development Opportunities in the Natural Environment produced by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), Scottish Natural Heritage, (SNH) and Highland Regional Council, (HRC)), (Ash Partnership, 1991), could be produced without mentioning or taking into account the role of Inverness Museum and the biological recording and interpretation work that is conducted there. That the potential role of museums was ignored is a gap in the report that has yet to be rectified.

A major development recently has been the setting up of Scottish Natural Heritage, an organisation with whom I have worked on a number of occasions. I am impressed with the dedication of the staff and with the developments that are being undertaken. Certainly the profile of the organisation is far higher than its two predecessors combined. Like all organisations undergoing change, particularly under this government, there is a slight loss of confidence in core values. I would suggest that, although there is a need to act entrepreneurially, and adopt some practices of the business world, we should have confidence in our core values of preservation, research and education. Many organisations, Local Government, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and museums have gone through this. I believe museums have reached a stage where they have changed, and are now rediscovering the confidence to once again return to their core values. SNH will do the same, and indeed the signs are that it is happening already. I would encourage all, in museums and outside, to "keep the faith". We can deliver our values, but in a way that impresses our political masters. The public want quality, that much is commonly agreed. I believe, however, that the public are not taken in by superficial displays that lack research. The public can tell the visitor centre that has created one-off displays bought in from outside design consultants. They will visit these and pay for entry, but what they will come back to is the centre that offers the opportunity to learn in a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere. The centre that succeeds will be the one that successfully conveys to the visitor the excitement and enthusiasm that the staff have for their subject. The one that can show the public the latest findings, the research that is going on now, in a way that gets over the excitement of those who are doing that work. This view is increasingly being touted by consultants, I would cite the KPMG Seminar at last years Museums and Heritage Show in London, (KPMG Peat Marwick, 1992). The public are looking for more than a "Leisure Experience". However we tart it up in language such as "Leisure Learning Opportunities" it means that our core work is valued,

and will be supported, if we can involve the public and give them an understanding of what we do.

This is not to say that there is not a role for the static display. I am referring here to the sorts of display that, for example, Forest Enterprise, and Ranger services do well. The typical wooden hut, with displays and reconstructions of habitats and the like. These work well, and can and are duplicated on sites around the country. But I do not believe that they can be translated to the large scale. There is a danger that many of the new, large scale interpretive ventures around the country will be larger versions of these, staffed by shop attendants and restaurant staff, and distanced from the source of their information — the professional staff working at the cutting edge. I believe the key to success of these projects, apart from good planning, marketing, and all the other business skills, will be how far they give the visitor an opportunity to feel involved in the work of the parent organisation. It is a question of empowerment. If we give the visitor only a surface display of what we think they want, we are assuming that they are not capable of independent thought and development. If we give them the opportunity to understand what we do, why do we do it, how they can influence us, and the opportunity for personal development through learning, then they will respond by sharing our problems and our values with us, and give us their support to help us solve them. But how does this work in practice?

I think that it would be a mistake to think solely in terms of centres interpreting natural history. That is not to say that there is not a place for them; I am working as part of a team looking at a marine environment centre at the moment. But let us start by looking at why we interpret things at all. Part of the reason is for the economic benefit that such centres bring in, in terms of visitor spending and job creation. Let us not kid ourselves, this is a major reason why funds are becoming available for such projects. However, the main gain for society is social and educational. My work on the human history side is concerned with working with communities, giving them a sense of the past, and thereby an understanding of the present. This promotes a sense of the very collective experiences that created the community in the first place. It gives incomers and locals alike equal access to common history and legend. This understanding of the present and sense of community gives a confidence to enable the community to grow for the future. If this is true for human history how much more is it the case for the environment. Communities are where they are because of the landscape in which they sit; have developed as they have because of the environment in which they live; and will have a future only if they have an understanding of how to look after their world, both on the micro and the macro scale. Thus communities need to understand the place the environment has in their lives if they are to appreciate what effects they might have on it.

The Holistic Approach

Much of this will be accepted wisdom by the reader. However, I would add to this that the future of natural history interpretation lies in an holistic approach to interpretation. The old divisions can no longer survive. The point

we have to get over is that people impinge on the environment in many detrimental ways. To get this message over we must get them to take personal ownership of the problems, and thus work towards resolving them. I would maintain that this is best done through showing how the environment impinges on them. Thus the human element, how human history and the present have been moulded and influenced by, and indeed are the result of, the micro environment in which each community exists, is vital. One way of achieving this is the eco-museum approach. This approach moves away from single, or even multi disciplined approach, to one which seeks to preserve and interpret all aspects of a culture, both human and natural. People are empowered by understanding; giving them information and knowledge is the way to giving them understanding and ownership of problems. Once this has been done solutions can be sought.

If it is accepted that an understanding of the present through the past, in both human and natural history terms, is a way forward a route becomes clearer. Communities must be empowered through a holistic approach to past and present. Museums, regardless of who runs them, are used to doing this, and, further, it is part of our *raison d'être*. But the role of the multiplicity of organisations must be empowerment of the community, a sharing of information, and acceptance of community values. Once done this means that each organisation can support that element of a community's plans that most closely fits its own values and directions. An example of this can be found in Lochcarron, a small community in Wester Ross. At a modest level a community group want to preserve and interpret their heritage. They have decided on a theme of industry in the highlands, as their community partly grew from an attempt to produce linen cloth in a factory in the eighteenth century. Because many of the attempts at industrial development in the area are a result of geological and natural features, from mining in the bronze age to oil rigs in the 1980's, they are including in their displays a major section on how the environment has effected human settlement and development. This element plus landscaping and tree planting to create a micro environment on the site, is being supported by SNH. Ross and Cromarty District Council is assisting with the rest of the displays, and Ross and Cromarty Enterprise (the Local Enterprise Company) and RCDC are supporting the tourist element of the project. An example of organisations with both differing and overlapping aims, working together through a local group, empowering them, not just to run a museum, but to assist in helping that community to grow towards the future and understand the importance of the environment around them. This may be on a small scale, but I would argue strongly that the returns demonstrate it is a very high value for money exercise.

But communities cannot do this without support, nor can they get information without someone gathering and disseminating it. As Miles (1987: 92) suggested, it is vital that museums continue their role particularly as centres for biological recording, and as the report showed, this cannot be done everywhere, as not all museums can employ professional natural historians on the staff. The Miles Report suggested centres of excellence whose role would be to support other institutions. In the Highlands historically this has

been Inverness. With Local Government reform around the corner, there is no better time or place to raise the subject of how this role can be maintained and developed into the future. I hope, and intend, that this will be debated as part of the discussions which will surely take place as soon as the announcement of the future is made.

Summary

Organisations must co-operate on the macro-scale by recognising that they may have overlapping aims and respecting the rights of others to work in a given field. The best way of ensuring cooperation is by working through communities and letting them be the catalyst for developments. This has the added benefit of empowering people and having them take ownership of the environmental issues facing us all. I see the future of biological interpretation as one soundly based in an holistic approach, and I see it firmly based in eco-museums around the Highlands, supported by a wide range of organisations. I think that it is an exciting future, and I cannot wait!

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