

## Scottish Environment Festival 2014 Report

This year's theme was **Scotland, the Environment and the World!**, celebrating our environment in the year of Scottish Government's Homecoming 2014, the Glasgow Commonwealth Games and the centenary of the death of John Muir. Amidst the political debates around the referendum challenge, the festival provided a good contrast, looking outwards at our connections with the wider world. The festival was meant to celebrate the Scottish contribution to environmentalism in the past, the present and the future. Event sponsors included Historic Scotland for one of our seminars, Calor Gas for the Pub Quiz again (following on from last year's success) and the National Parks for the Evening Reception. Our overall sponsoring MSP for the Festival was once again Sarah Boyack MSP.

The Festival offered three seminars, the Evening Reception and the Pub Quiz. We also continued with the idea of Constituency Visits but following on from feedback from last year instead of restricting the visits to one weekend in February which limited many members who have hibernating or spring/summer species, we have expanded the Constituency Visits to be yearlong at the convenience of MSPs and members. We are hoping there will be more uptake and interaction with this change.

The Festival started with **Our Worldwide Environment Connections Today** seminar kindly organized by Charles Dundas from Woodland Trust and taking place in the Scottish Parliament. Our sponsoring MSP was Mike MacKenzie who jokingly attributed himself as 'not being the usual suspect' for sponsoring such an event but was happy to do so. The seminar highlighted the European and International networks that our members are actively involved in and how our ideas and concerns are truly global. The event was attended by 11 externals and Maureen Watt MSP and we heard presentations from Johnny Hughes of Scottish Wildlife Trust on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Silviu Petrovan from Froglife on EU wide initiatives Toads on Roads and finally Andrew Fairbairn from Woodland Trust on European Tree of the Year.

The next seminar was **The Scottish Contribution to Environment Science** sponsored by Historic Scotland and hosted by Claudia Beamish MSP in the iconic venue of Riddle's Court on the Royal Mile. The seminar looked at the contributions of Scots over the centuries, to the development of the environmental sciences, and drew attention to the enormous contributions of Patrick Geddes, Alexander Wilson and John Murray. Professor Aubrey Manning spoke of Patrick Geddes, while Paul Walton from RSPB Scotland spoke of Alexander Wilson with Denis Mollison from Heberdian Whale and Dolphin Trust on John Murray. The event was well attended and participants found it informative with lively discussion at the end of the presentations.

The last of seminars was **The World Watches Scottish Nature** kindly organized by Thomas Quinn from RSPB Scotland and hosted back in the Scottish Parliament sponsored by Liam McArthur MSP. This seminar had the highest MSP attendance for seminars with many Species Champions attending, including Rob Gibson MSP, Nannette Milne MSP, Rhoda Grant MSP and Dave Thompson MSP. The seminar focused on the many visitors from across the globe that come, each year, to visit Scotland for her wonderful landscapes and wildlife. Presentations were given from David Sexton RSPB Scotland on Eagles and tourism on the Isle of Mull and Sarah Pern from Ecoventures on Wildlife Tourism on the Moray Firth.

The **Evening Reception** was the highlight and most popular event of the festival as always, despite the delay with Parliamentary Business (see below for more detail). As last year the National Parks provided information stands and taster selection from local breweries. Our sponsoring MSP was Claire Baker who made references to APRS' Unfinished Business report and the expansion of the great works our National Parks do in her speech. The Minister for the Environment, Paul Wheelhouse MSP also spoke, making strong reference to the trustworthy and respectful advice LINK members provide the Parliament and Government as well as reference to the success of the Species Champion initiative. Our president Ross

Finnie also spoke concluding his speech with sincere regret of the difference we continue to have over the definition of 'sustainable' in relation to growth. The attendance of MSPs was patchy due to delay in Parliamentary Business and numerous competing events at the same time, but overall we had good attendance and drop-ins or apologies from regulars.

Thursday evening saw the **Pub Quiz** in the Member's Restaurant sponsored by Calor Gas with Sarah Boyack MSP sponsoring and being on the team who came in second. Attendance from LINK members was high with teams from RSPB, SWT, WTS and Archaeology Scotland and their fellow archaeologist colleagues from Historic Scotland and ScARF as well as a team of individuals, unfortunately the attendance of MSPs or their researchers was null as this particular Thursday was before the recess therefore many had left for their constituency (see below for more info on feedback). Once again it was the archaeologist who took home the top prize and the evening was enjoyed by all with special thanks to our Quizmaster Alan Cox, who once again volunteered his time to help including a music round.

### **Sponsorship and thanks**

LINK Board and members are pleased to acknowledge the support and active cooperation of SEF's financial sponsors: Historic Scotland, Calor Scotland, Cairngorms National Park and Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. Big thanks goes to our volunteer Quizmaster, Alan Cox. We would also like to extend our acknowledgment and thanks to our MSP sponsors, Sarah Boyack, Claire Baker, Claudia Beamish, Mike McKenzie and Liam McArthur for all their help and support of our work.

### **Moving forward**

Scottish Environment Festival 2014 proved to be a more challenging event to plan this year primarily due to the fact of staff change over in the Scottish Parliament Events Team meant that procedures and rules were more strictly adhered to and less flexibility and leeway were given. We were only allowed as an organization to book two events per year in the Parliament which meant we prioritized the Evening Reception and the Pub Quiz. We then had to resort to asking LINK members to book on our behalf and help out with seminar planning which in the end got the result we wanted but proved additional work for our members and ourselves.

We were limited in the days available in Parliament to us this year, as first dates were too late in February and the only other available dates for the Reception and Pub Quiz were earlier in the month. This meant that unlike previous years the Evening Reception was on a Tuesday and the Pub Quiz fell on a Thursday before a recess which we didn't take into account when agreeing the day and which meant no MSP attendance on the night.

The Evening Reception was also slightly blighted by delayed Parliamentary Business as the Same Sex Marriage Bill was being passed followed by a Member's Debate. After the passing of the Bill many MSPs were in the Garden Lobby expecting to see our reception and join us briefly before going to other commitments but because of Parliamentary Process we weren't allowed to bring our guests in while Parliament was in session. This was relayed to waiting MSPs who expressed surprise and dissatisfaction to this and said they would raise it themselves. It didn't help that there were numerous competing events on the night, including celebration parties from the Bill, a Burns Night and an Energy Conference.

Moving forward there is a feeling amongst LINK members and staff that the Festival or Week format should be changed for next year and shaken up as it is starting to feel tried and tested and we are not getting increased MSP engagement. It was generally agreed that the Evening Reception continues to be the highlight and most successful event of the Week/Festival and doesn't need the format changed, but perhaps a rethink to seminars or other events is needed.

There was a suggestion to elicit more member participation in planning stages of the Week/Festival to give members more of a sense of ownership and engagement in the events and to input their ideas of how they see the Week/Festival shaping up. Initial suggestions include letting members know as soon as possible the exact dates of the Week/Festival and what available 'slots' are open to members and of

course what the theme is, although more can be done to let members suggest themes for the Week/Festival in the future anyway with email-arounds.

Another suggestion to a change in the format would be to have an event which highlighted or showcased to Parliamentarians the work which our members have done with MSPs throughout the preceding year alongside the work LINK members do. This event could be a round-up record of the year and could draw on Constituency Visits (we would need to ask members to keep good records of those happening now), Species Champion engagement and other Parliamentary activity. Hopefully an event like this might subsequently get both more member and MSP engagement throughout the year building up to the next Week/Festival.

These are just initial thoughts, but if we were to go with this new format, planning for it would need to begin within the next few months and not at a later date as it has done in the past.

I welcome people comments and suggestions.

Rea Cris March 2014