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Submission on the draft Culture Strategy for Scotland.

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 35 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society. LINK provides a forum for its members, enabling informed debate, assisting co-operation within the voluntary sector, and acting as a strong voice for the environment.

LINK is pleased to welcome the consultation on a Culture Strategy for Scotland, and is grateful for the opportunity to comment. We have decided to provide high level comments rather than a detailed response, and stand ready to assist the drafting team with further information should that be helpful.

Definition of Culture.

LINK members consider that 'culture' should be broadly defined, and in particular the strong links between the arts, landscape, wildlife habitats, wildlife itself, our coasts and seas must be recognised. Equally importantly the long human history of settlement and land management found in Scotland, and the distinct rural way of life that evolved in harmony with nature underpins much of our archaeology, historic built environment, and the trades and traditions that led to the settlement of people in patterns that characterise so much of Scotland today.

It would seem remiss to somehow exclude all of this by use of terminology or definitions that are more focused on the arts or the museums sector. A visit to any gallery or music venue richly demonstrates the inspiration artists, poets, musicians and cultural movements throughout history have derived from Scotland's wildlife and landscapes. Conserving and enhancing this resource so it can be a future inspiration for generations yet to come, seems to us to belong at the core of any culture strategy.

We thus consider that care should be taken to ensure the Strategy is as relevant to organisations, communities and individuals whose focus is the appreciation and enjoyment of these natural assets.

It would be wrong to exclude this growing interest in place making and conservation, by narrow definitions of ‘culture’ that owe more to how the Scottish Government organises itself, than how people appreciate and enjoy culture.

To illustrate our point we consider the land and seas of Orkney provide a pertinent example. Much of Orkney is designated under International treaties as being of the highest quality for its wildlife, and nature, much of it designated under international law. It is intimately mixed with the Neolithic cultural assets found throughout the islands, and some of the most important listed monuments, such as the Ring of Brodgar, are situated within nature reserves managed by LINK member RSPB Scotland. Joint interpretation of the surrounding land at Brodgar, and how the standing stones would have appeared to our forebears, is in place. Most Link members that own nature reserves find they are custodians of scheduled monuments as land of high nature value is often associated with less intensive agriculture or forestry management, where such historic or archaeological sites have persisted. Tourism to Orkney is founded on the nature the islands support, and its ancient landscapes and Neolithic monuments. The international cultural importance of Orkney’s historic landscapes is recognised by their designation as the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site.

Similarly some LINK members sponsor resident artists, and provide opportunities for cultural activities that celebrate place, history and nature on their sites. The NTS in particular has a long tradition of promoting such links to the public, running programmes that can be accessed by the public, including hard to reach groups at its properties. Residents and visitors experience places as a totality – a blend of cultural, natural and built heritage.

LINK members are also active in supporting celebrations of the folk traditions that derive from traditional land uses eg Crofting, or fishing, which evolved over centuries in close harmony with the land and sea, and which shaped special habitats like the Machair in the Western Isles, a cultural landscape found only in Scotland and small parts of Ireland. These areas are now the last places in Europe where wildflowers, scarce bee species and rare birds are found in numbers that predate the post-war agricultural changes that have reduced farmland wildlife over so much of the continent. The crofting traditions, of land use, language including song and poetry, and settlement patterns are rich in associations between people and nature. The conservation and encouragement of these traditions is key to protecting the nature that is found there as well as a unique way of life.

Accordingly we recommend that Scotland’s Culture Strategy makes clear that the natural heritage, including landscapes, wildlife, National Parks and protected areas, and the traditions and skills of land management and use that have shaped them, are seen as central to the Strategy. We also urge that greater efforts are made to integrate the natural heritage into plans and programmes, including funding schemes that emerge from the Strategy, and LINK stands ready to assist this.

The forthcoming year of Coasts and Waters provides an excellent opportunity to develop and test this concept. Scotland’s seas, coasts and maritime heritage are very special, as is the wildlife this resource supports. For example a significant proportion of Europe’s seabirds nest around Scotland, and in some cases the global population. Whales and other cetaceans are responding to protection and better management, and marine wildlife is supporting a growing tourism industry.

Other issues.

The Strategy should be explicit that it will encourage sustainability- both in terms of its use of natural resources, and in minimising GHG emissions. Thus support for walking, cycling and the use of public transport to cultural events should be mainstreamed. Similarly new build and construction to support museums, the arts and other cultural venues and activities should use water recycling, green roofs and employ high levels of energy efficiency as part of any funding packages/incentives.

Access and engagement of hard to reach and disadvantaged communities should be central to the Strategy. We consider this also fits well with the health and wellbeing agenda, which LINK members already support through encouraging walking, and the active use of green space near and around towns and cities.

The Strategy should seek to mainstream culture, rather than keep it in a silo. For example, government decisions on town and country planning, transport, or the management of natural resources can all have an impact on the sustainability of our cultures. A current example of this is the replacement of the Common Agricultural Policy where, if decisions are kept within a narrow, market-centred silo, we will miss the potential impact of how changes to land management could affect our natural and cultural heritage. The Strategy therefore needs to cut across these government silos.

The Strategy should encourage greater collaboration between and across the heritage sectors, so that opportunities to deliver wildlife rich green space in urban areas, a target in the Biodiversity Strategy, is adopted by Arts and cultural events and programmes. More discussion at a strategic level to maximise and explore these opportunities and publicise good practise would be welcome, and we would be happy to help facilitate such discussions.

Yours faithfully



Charles Dundas
LINK Chair