

The Cairngorms National Park officially launches as the first UK Long-term Social-Ecological Research (LTSER) Platform

Over 40 representatives of Scottish academic and research organisations, volunteer groups, government agencies and NGOs gathered for the launch of the Cairngorms National Park as the UK's first LTSER Platform (Aviemore 14 Nov 2013). So far four organisations (Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, University of the Highlands and Islands, James Hutton Institute and Scottish Natural Heritage) have formally signed the memorandum of understanding which pledges them to actively work together to enhance the knowledge on social, economic and ecological aspects relevant to the sustainable management of the Park in a truly interdisciplinary fashion.

The ethos of the LTSER platforms in Europe (under the auspices of the LTER-Europe network) actively encourages using the data legacy and infrastructure of traditional long-term ecological research (LTER) sites and marrying this knowledge with the social and economic research in a place-based approach to sustainable management of an area. The Allt a' Mharcaidh catchment which is nestled in the hills behind Kincaig and is the most northerly site in the UK Environmental Change Network was highlighted as an example of the progression in scientific thinking as it initially focused on only ecological monitoring when it started over 15 years ago but now has a more holistic approach routinely collecting data relevant to social science research.

Hamish Trench, Director of Conservation & Visitor Experience at the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) highlighted the advantages of this integrated approach to research within the park. The initiative builds on the work conducted by Prof Martin Price's team at UHI with Beltane funding to create the research gateway. Hamish said "We want to position the National Park as a 'Learning Landscape', to connect research into management and make the most of the Cairngorms as a place for research. Today we are launching the Cairngorms LTSER Platform as the CNPA recognise our central role as a hub for knowledge exchange within the Park". Hamish encouraged other organisations to sign the MoU and help build an exciting, practical, collaborative and productive hub for the creation and exchange of knowledge relevant to the sustainable management of the park and wider afield.

The event kicked off with a 'speed dating' event when the participants table hopped and introduced themselves to each other, fulfilling one of the primary aims of an LTSER platform – to provide communication space. We also heard from Carol Ritchie, Director of Europarc on the relevance of this initiative to protected areas across Europe. This was followed by a series of six short presentations:

- Economic and Social health of the Park report – *David Watson, Economic Development Manager, CNPA*
- Cairngorms Community Heritage Project – *Eve Boyle, RCAHMS*
- Cairngorms Nature – *Andy Ford, Cairngorms Nature Manager*
- Ecosystems Research – OPENNESS Project – *Jan Dick, CEH*
- Spey Catchment – *Brian Shaw, Spey Fisheries Board*
- Stakeholders' perceptions *Kirsty Blackstock, James Hutton Institute*

In the afternoon the group split into three groups and discussed three questions designed to fulfil another object of a LTSER platform 'research agenda scoping'. The three questions were:

What are the research priorities that should be identified in the strategy – both long term themes and immediate needs?

How do we link into, and frame these priorities in ways that connect into, national and international research programmes and funding?

What are the ways we can get collaborative research done in the Park? What can research institutions do, are there ways of doing research differently or better that we should promote more? What role for volunteers and citizen science/research?

The lively discussions created a lot of output and current core LTSER team of Hamish Trench (CNPA), Martin Price (UHI), Alison Hester (JHI) and Jan Dick (CEH) are eager to build on this exciting initiative.

Grant Moir, CEO, Cairngorms National Park Authority welcomed the creation of the LTSER platform commenting "Good timely information is needed to make management decisions". He valued the long standing partnership which many of the research organisations had with the park and welcomed this next phase of research collaboration.

The outputs of the day will help shape a research and knowledge exchange strategy for the National Park.

If you would like to learn more and contribute to the development of the Cairngorm LTSER and research strategy please contact hamishtrench@cairngorms.co.uk