

LEWIS (Scotland, United Kingdom)

Development of the prehistoric site at Calanais



The action

Calanais, on the island of Lewis (North-West Scotland), is one of the UK's leading prehistoric menhir sites. It is at least five thousand years old. Its remoteness from major routes has protected it but at the same time prevented it from benefiting fully from tourism and gaining all the local recognition it deserves. The growing number of visitors (currently 40 000 a year) finally forced the installation of an "interpretation and reception" Centre to explain better the history of the site and to protect it. The Centre includes a permanent exhibition on the history of the menhirs as well as a restaurant and a local crafts shop.

Key elements

- > Desire to exploit local potential for the direct benefit of the population.
- > Mobilisation of groups with sometimes divergent interests and search for convergence with a view to a joint development project to benefit the entire local community.
- > Promotion of a sustainable and positive economic initiative, exploiting local natural resources of a fixed nature.
- > Setting-up of a centre to channel and encourage local development activity.

Context

Lewis has abundant natural resources and a rich cultural heritage. The menhirs of Calanais are one of the finest examples of late Neolithic construction in Scotland.

The existing infrastructure was completely inappropriate for the number of visitors to the site (around 40 000 a year), who also had a deleterious impact on nearby villages. On the site itself, historical information was lacking and no effort was made to develop Calanais' potential. For an area in economic decline, the situation had become unacceptable.

Starting point

The consultation process lasted more than two years. The 11 organisations and interest groups involved each had a different opinion on what to do with Calanais, but shared the same wish to find a solution whereby the site would be properly managed and the region would keep the proceeds of tourism. This diversity of interests prompted the creation of a project steering committee, in which more than 25 representatives of the various sectors of Scottish society took part. This made procedures slow and rather cumbersome, but allowed genuine solidarity to be established between the participants and enabled the initiative to grow both socially and commercially. The fame of the site ensured keen media coverage right from the start. The principal features of the project made newspaper headlines and sparked off debates, making the consultation and cooperation process rather difficult. However, the partners eventually approved the construction of an interpretation and reception centre on the site.

Implementation

An information dossier was put together by the bodies involved, and a study commissioned from the Centre for Environmental Interpretation (CEI) to obtain advice on the following points: how to ensure the protection of the site, what style to adopt in promoting the site and providing information, what sort of cultural and leisure services to offer visitors, and how to minimise the inconvenience for the local community and the adverse environmental impact of tourism, while deriving maximum economic and social benefit, especially in terms of jobs.

Once these points had been clarified, a feasibility study was carried out. It sought, *inter alia*, to integrate the Centre into the local social and cultural framework rather than make it merely a seasonal attraction, and to choose a suitable spot (the most difficult point to solve) and architectural style.

The Western Isles, Skye & Lochalsh LEADER group played a catalysing role in setting up the forms of cooperation necessary for joint action by the various participants. The local authorities provided technical assistance for architectural and engineering work, Historic Scotland contributed its know-how and helped with planning, while regional development bodies also contributed.

The Centre finally opened its doors in June 1995. It offers visitors information on the environment and on the history of the locality – signs and information are in Gaelic (the most commonly used language locally) and English, while explanatory booklets are available in several European languages. In addition to this interpretative information space and the space reserved for the temporary exhibitions, the Centre offers visitors a restaurant and a local crafts shop.

The initiative is also part of a regional drive to improve the supply of tourist accommodation and visitor information, but the reception and introduction at several attractive sites in the region.

A non-profit-making limited company, Standing Stones Trust, was set up to publicise and explain the history of the menhirs of Calanais and of other sites in the Hebrides. It manages the Centre. Its Board of Directors is made up of representatives of the principal financial partners and of the local community. The Trust is also tasked with encouraging archaeological study of the area and its surroundings, by publicising and developing the programme of ground research on the occupation and prehistoric environment of the West of Lewis Island, directed by Edinburgh University. The plan is to reserve the 2 hectares of the Calanais Farm, near the Centre, to set up a programme of experiments relating to ancient farming practices.

Budget and sources of funding

The total project cost amounted to ECU 749 037, including ECU 192 061 from the Community funds of the LEADER I programme, ECU 128 040 from Historic Scotland, ECU 204 865 from the Western Isles Council, ECU 32 010 from Scottish Natural Heritage and ECU 192 061 from Western Isles Enterprise.

Innovative elements for the area

Mobilising the community and social cohesion

The local population got involved at each stage of the project, from the initial idea to day-to-day management. The action called for a complex planning process, in order to apportion legal, technical and operational responsibilities among a large number of organisations. Though cumbersome, this approach allowed confidence to develop, so that everyone could make a long-term commitment. The end product is appreciated by the local community, which derives important economic, environmental, cultural and social benefits from it. The Centre is now a part of local life, as the inhabitants use it for their own activities outside the tourist season.

Activities and employment

The Centre created 10 jobs (4 full-time, 6 part-time), which were offered to local young people. It also diversified activities in an area where exploitable resources are rare. The only structure of the kind in the region, the Centre prefigures other initiatives to develop the economy and culture of the Hebrides.

The areas identity

One of the Centre's main aims is to promote local cultural history and enhance the island so as to attract visitors and investment. The Centre has diversified its activities and now offers a series of promotional products: a guide to the menhirs, explanatory booklets in several languages, local craft products, etc.

As the site is also the subject of scientific research, the island's image is further enhanced.

Environment, management of space and natural resources

The formulation and implementation of the project called for delicate negotiations to strike a balance between competing interests regarding the use of space. The problem was to attract visitors to the site while reducing their physical impact, to facilitate access to it while respecting local pasture rights, customs and property, to promote it while protecting the integrity of the place and local practices.

Migration and social and professional integration

Anxious to create jobs in a marginal rural area where fixed jobs are rare, the project laid emphasis on the recruitment of young local workers. It also instilled a feeling of pride which can serve as an example to the local community and encourage young people not to emigrate.

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Located 75 km from the extreme north-west of the Scottish coast, Lewis Island (20 000 inhabitants) has a harsh climate and suffers serious problems of communication and access to markets. Unemployment is almost 11%, and potential for economic diversification is rare. What work there is concentrated mainly in Stornoway, the main town, around 20 km from Calanais, and is focused on services, local administration and, to a lesser extent, fishing. Agriculturally, the region is classified as "seriously disadvantaged" despite widespread "crofting", based essentially on extensive live-stock-farming of sheep. The weaving of wool, organised by the Harris Tweed company, is an important craft activity.

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