

Visit to Koli National Park, Finland

Background.....

In common with several other European countries, Scotland has several areas of land which have “official” designations reflecting the fact that they are areas of outstanding natural beauty. In our particular area of Wester Ross, this is the NSA – National Scenic Area.

The NEST project seeks to develop linkages between the Highlands and other countries. NEST partners are from:

Iceland – The Vatnajokull Glacier (www.visitvatnajokull.is)

Sweden – The High Coast Area (www.hogakusten.com/indexh.htm)

Finland – Koli National Park (www.koli.fi)

And ourselves..... Wester Ross National Scenic Area (No current site – However, T@ Wester Ross is developing a “gateway” site for the area at the moment)

The rest of the partner countries had a visit to WR earlier on this year, where I’m afraid to say that we dumped several tens of thousands of litres of rainwater on them! However, they all seemed to enjoy the visit. The Finnish trip was the second in a series of such events, and the venue was the Koli National Park. This is located in the region of Karelia, which is in the North east of the country. It’s only a few kilometres from the Russian border, and Soviet influences were very evident in much of the architecture and habits of the people we met.

The Voyage.....

Well, none of us will forget this! Early morning flight from Aberdeen, then a flight from Heathrow to Helsinki. No problems so far then. However, the NINE hour overnight train from Helsinki to Joensuu in NE Finland left something to be desired. Why they call these things “sleepers” is anybody’s guess, because I absolutely fail to see how you are expected to get in some serious snoozing with all the clattering and banging that goes on. However, we couldn’t really fault the Finnish rail system, and the train arrived on time to the very minute at the opposite destination.

I had already formed some opinion on the Finnish language by this time, and the notes here say “Sounds like Klingon”.....this impression was backed up by a uniformed guard bursting into our cabins at 6.30am and barking instructions about arrival times etc. Knocking on the door? Forget it!

Looking out the window, first impressions from the night’s travel were of endless streams of trees. This was backed up by the view from the minibus as we went from Joensuu to Koli (about an hour).....trees.....trees.....and trees.....

It was part of a process we all went through over the next few days where we really began to appreciate what an attractive and varied landscape we have here in Wester Ross.

A photo.....



Bordering the Koli N Park, this is a photo of Lake Pielinen, which is really more of an inland sea rather than a “Lake”. The view above is roughly half the lake, and there is another huge wedge of it too the left of where the photo was taken. The piece of rock in the bottom right of the photo is “Ukko”. This is far more than just a rock, as it features in many myths and stories of the area. It seemed to appear on virtually every photo / story / film etc of the area – frankly, they would be lost without it!

Statistics for the area:

About 400 people in the National Park, over a 10 km stretch of road (2000 over 30km). The nearest large town is Joensuu, with about 40,000 of a population. This contrasts with the Gairloch area (for example) with approx 800 folk over 45km of single track, and Dingwall being the nearest large town with 5,000 pop.

First Impressions of NEST Partners.....

Well, since we arrived at 9am after an all night journey to be huddled straight into a day long meeting, first impressions were blurred! However, two things should be mentioned straight away.

One: The Wester Ross group is far smaller than any of the others. We have 8 people in total connected with NEST, whereas Iceland have 19, Sweden 30, and Finland – 40! Two, the other groups are totally different in their makeup. All the other groups have Universities, official tourist boards, Council groups, educational and scientific

organisations involved with their own projects, whereas we basically have 4 community groups, a single representative from the Council and SNH, and a few isolated businesses involved. So, we do not have access to anything like as much funding or technical resources as the others. It was obvious that this was not well known to the other groups, so we did our best to emphasise this during the conference.

They also appear to regard their National Parks in a far positive manner to here in Scotland, with a more business like and commercial approach taken to running them. They are looked upon as national assets, they have business plans, operating structures, visitors are actively encourage to use them. For example, Koli has an ongoing approach to energy conservation that means they can tell you *exactly* how much consumption each and every building in the NP uses on an annual basis -this is coupled to a long term plan to reduce consumption, grow self sufficiency, and become more cost effective as a result.

There was talk of eco – labelling products made within the NP, governed by the *overall* approach that the manufacturer had to ecology and the environment, along with how the product was made with respect to supporting the local economy. The talk of “standards” etc did not revolve around accommodation, like so much does in this country. Membership of these schemes? Yes, they cost the producer, but there was a pride taken by these producers to be part of the scheme. Interestingly, membership was on a sliding scale according to turnover – there weren’t the same issues surrounding divulging that turnover as is normally the case here!

So, what else was there to see?.....

They were very keen to show us the “traditional” side of Koli – indeed, throughout the conference it came across clearly that tradition features highly in their daily lives.

We were taken down to have a look at the lakeside first of all – really beautiful setting, and far larger than any lochside setting in this country. This was followed by a visit to the nearby ski centre, which is not at all like the broad, open slopes in this country (when you have snow!). Ski-ing in this context meant a downhill “slalom” type of activity, and there were steep ski tows to get participants back up to the top of the runs. These ran through dense forests, and we could well imagine what they looked like in deep snow.

Snow! This is *real* snow when it arrives (which at the time of writing, it now has). At Koli, they have snow like granny used to make! When the first snow falls, that’s it until next spring. A peculiarity of the large expanse of water being there is that it causes some kind of temperature inversion whereby they have absolute shedloads of snow a few hundred metres up the hill, but comparatively little down at the lake. In fact, many trees were felled last year – not through high winds, but the weight of snow they can each carry. Some of the larger ones can hold 7 (seven) tons of the stuff! And as far as cars are concerned, it is a legal requirement to change your tyres at this time of year, and fit snow tyres instead. It’s a law that’s apparently rigorously enforced as well, along with using dipped headlights at all times when street lights are on.

If you look at the following picture (which was taken in doors, looking at a very large montage on the far wall, you will see the trees in the foreground have tons of snow on them – yet down at the lake in the background, the trees have virtually nothing visible.



What lives in the forests here? Reindeer, elk, lynx, wolves (there was a pack active in the immediate area while we were there), and the occasional bear. Also *wolverines*, which we all agreed we didn't fancy having a discussion along the lines of "whose territory do you think you are on, mate?". Apparently they are seriously vicious and aren't in the least bit bothered that humans carry the advantage in size. They are also up to ten times the size of a pine marten, so clearly an animal worth taking note of! A note of personal triumph came when I caught sight of a Great Grey Owl sitting on top of a tree, but aside from that there was little sign of birdlife – in fact, the forests were suspiciously quiet. This made things all the more exciting when out for a walk I managed to lose the track for a short while, and in the midst of all the silence there was a sudden "crack!" from the undergrowth. With visions of things that looked suspiciously like large grey dogs bounding towards me with alarming speed, it was decided to retrace steps without further debate!

We did all wonder, though.....it's a common comment from visitors when they come here to Wester Ross. "Where's all the wildlife we hear about?" It was no different at Koli.

Next on the “Agenda” was a horse riding centre. This seemed to be pretty similar to pony trekking over here, but using predominantly Icelandic ponies (to the huge amusement of the Icelandic deputation!). The trekking takes place over some of the original racks and trails in the national park, and the owners of the riding centre have a very amiable and co-operative existence with the park itself.

Some horses.....



They have also recently built a café / restaurant / small conference facility, shown here....



We were offered a number of local (traditional) foods here, the most memorable being a home produced non-alcoholic beer. To all intents and purposes it had the appearance on muddy water – some would argue this is how it tasted as well! This was accompanied by yet another helping of Reindeer soup, along with a selection of salads, vegetables, and lingonberry juice.

Food wise, this was a surprising feature of Finland – salads everywhere, lingonberry juice everywhere, and very strong homemade rye bread. Breakfasts consisted of salted fish (herring and vendace), salads again, rye bread, cereals. We had Elk soup once (like reindeer, but stronger), and a stew consisting of a mix of pork and beef. Alcohol? Bear ale, and a make of Lapland beer (both bottled) which to a real ale person like myself tasted just like another eurobeer, and two forms of ciders – based on either pears or apples. That's about it, apart from the most surprising alcohol feature of the entire trip.....genuine real ale! Gasp! This is only made in a tiny brewery on a small island off Helsinki, and as far as we know it's only available in that immediate area. But it was excellent!

The horse centre also made available their own spring water, freshly drawn from a well “up the hill”. We discussed what would happen in this country if you tried to make your own beer or water and then made this available to tourists without any obvious form of a licence. The conclusion was that the “coouncil” would be down on you like a ton of bricks, but there you go.

The final thing to mention about the horse centre was the hifi system contained in the eating area. This was large enough to potentially make the power go down 1000 miles away in Helsinki. Whether the owners were cleverly disguising the fact that they were deaf or not, we don't know, but it sported a 1000 watt per channel bass system, accompanied by a 400 watt p.ch. main system, and a whole load of attached gubbins such as pre amps & poweramps etc.



The speakers in the middle of the pic were nearly six foot high! Just thought I'd mention that. (If anybody is interested, it was mainly a Harman Kardon system).

On return, the next presentation.....

Was about Koli, its structure, and the company behind the Hotel Koli. The reason for mentioning the Hotel is because it is not owned by a private individual or group of individuals. Rather, it's actually the equivalent of the Co-operative society in this country, and has a chain of hotels, several supermarkets, and a number of tourism related organisations such as the ski centre at Koli.

Additionally, the group operate the nature centre at Koli, and hold conferences, training events, and a host of other operations.

Structurally, the set up of the Koli National Park underlined something of the different approach to national parks in Finland as against the UK. The organisational structure was hugely complex, with many layers of administration efficiently laid out on several screens in front of us. The whole thing reminded me of the way in which a Soviet (or Klingon!) based administration might run things. Suffice to say that personally, I lost track of everything by the time the third screen had rumbled past showing managers, under managers, supervisors, and people for this and people for that.

However, that's not to say that this didn't work as a way of organising something like a national park. Throughout the few days there, all the trips out, the visits to places, the scheduling etc was all very impressive. Likewise, there was no litter, everything worked, guides turned up on time, alterations to schedules were few and far between. (There's an "except" in here somewhere, isn't there?)....yes.

Call it an impression only, if you like, but several of us had the idea that there was a bit of a "sheen" on things, to the extent that if one thing had gone wrong there would be a Koli - sized pack of cards descending on us! And, while being given a tour of the actual village of Koli, it was noticed that there were very few youngsters in evidence - actually, hardly any. Well, one out walking her dog. This impression followed us all the way to the civic reception later that night. Absolutely *no* teenagers or youngsters at all, despite this being described to us as a community "party"! I did wonder whether there were troubles behind the scenes with the rural areas losing population to the cities.

Industry: The Stone Factory.....

The Tulikivi soapstone factory - the centre of soapstone stoves. Soapstone is an igneous rock with impressive thermal qualities. Freeze it and it stays cold for hours, heat it up and it stays hot for hours. The factory here is the largest employer in the area, and with a turnover (I think) of around £50 million per year. It was assumed by ourselves that this must come from large scale selling of stone to the government for roads or whatever, but not a bit of it! The income comes mainly from *Stoves*.

With a price of £3000 up to £40,000 + these are impressive objects by any standards. The thing is, the soapstone continues belching out heat long after the fire has gone out, so they are presumably quite efficient at heating a home. The physical weight of these stoves was enormous - imagine if you will, several tons of stone in your sitting room.

And who owns or buys these things? Well, once we actually saw around the factory, it was clear that almost every building we had been in up until that point had one sitting somewhere.....and as to the really expensive ones? Vladimir Putin has no less than four of them, and Bill Gates has two. What that says about the relative merits of good living in the East and the West I leave you to debate. With the Russian border only being a few dozen kilometres away, perhaps the factory accountant can be leant on a bit more heavily?

Some stoves:



And you are quite right – the Gates / Putin model is the last one shown!

Aside from this, the factory had an absolutely stunning visitors centre, which explained the whole process of rock and crystal formation from beginning to end. State of the art displays, and a visitors shop with a huge array of soapstone gifts, jewellery, crystals etc for sale.



These huge stone globes are simply sitting in (Stone) bowls of water...you could easily turn them by hand

The factory also held several works of art and sculpture by well known Finnish artists:



Carved from a single block of wood!

A sculpture of Glass and Quartz



Next day, the actual conference bit of the proceedings was beginning to wear down a bit. However, by now we had all learned quite a bit about what each country was trying to achieve in its own area. In Finland, for example, they have a heavy commitment to the traditions and legends of the area, while in Iceland – quite understandably – they are focused on the natural forces that shape their landscape. We worry about snow on the road sometimes...they don't ever know whether the road that *was* there last night is *still* going to be in the same place the next day! If at all! Sweden had a particular interest in subjects such as quality standards and the maintenance of these in the context of a "brand name", along with the preservation of a particularly beautiful and balanced part of the world – no outrageously high mountains or lochs, but a rolling coastal area with woodland.

All areas had a common interest in trying to ensure that future generations would be able to enjoy the landscape and the natural environment in ways which do not damage or alter it in any significant way. The largest difference between the Scottish Highlands and the rest is possibly the fact that the entire landowning structure is totally different here. In Iceland, for example, if a particular proposal / project / idea is seen to be of benefit to either the people or the land – they go and do it! Whereas we have to go around the houses at great length to secure everybody's agreement and co-operation. Good or bad? Discuss!

The Hut.....

We were given lunch one day in a traditional hut – made out of wood, centrally placed fire, reindeer hides and wooden benches to sit on, smoke everywhere, traditional food cooked in a traditional manner (albeit with a certain amount of preparation, given that you wouldn't expect 30 hunters to suddenly appear in your tent at 1.30pm precisely, and all wanting food)

The Hut & Fierce Hunters.....



The food etc was quite interesting: The “plates” were slices cut from the growths you have on the sides of certain trees, appropriately sized to be either for a starter / main course / hot drink etc. Mugs were there to hold both hot and cold drinks, and either wooden implements or hands for cutlery. The mugs were the most intuitive design I think I have yet to hold, and beautifully carved.

Food itself? Inevitably, reindeer / elk / thing with antlers soup to start, accompanied by lingonberry juice, then coffee or tea. But the follow up to the soup was quite interesting, being a high fat milk which was slow heated *then* “flash” heated over the open fire. The end result resembled Mozzarella, and was referred to as “Cheesebread”. It was really delicious, and even now I can see Tesco’s developing their new of Strawberry and Mango cheesebreads to compliment the existing range of Anchovy, Apple, and Old original.



At this stage, the leading representatives from each country were off to a meeting, so us minions were taken on a hike around the park, ending up at the village later on. The forthcoming evening was described as a community party, so anticipation was high!

Hiking wise, much of what we saw could easily have been in Wester Ross, as the greater proportion of the walk was in woodland. There was a slice of amusement with Sammi (one of the students, who had consistently displayed an extremely dry sense of humour throughout the visit). They were acting as guides, and were not impressed when the instruction came down that they were expected to wear traditional dress to guide us with. When asked “Is this what the best dressed guides wear?” Sammi icily retorted “No.....this is what the stupidly dressed guides wear!”

And on the walk, we saw.....

Anthills.....



Evidence of “Slash and Burn “Techniques, widely practised in the area



And of course (as you do).....



The House that Sibelius lived in!

Now, party time.....

This was utterly intriguing in many ways. We all know what would happen if a “party” was arranged here.....would this be an insight into life in a Finnish village?

Bizarrely, we were all first treated to a full meal at what seemed to be a form of “Community House” in Koli village, *then* informed that we were all shortly going over to the village hall for a (and I quote) “*feast*” and a party.

Things started off well enough, with an introductory speech etc about our visit. This was followed by some admittedly very well played and sung traditional songs, accompanied by a young and highly accomplished accordionist. However just when we were thinking “Well, this might be Ok” everything stopped! There then followed an excruciatingly long speech about the tradition of bears, how Finnish royalty were directly descended from them, and various items about bear myths and legends – several photos show folk with matchsticks supporting their eyelids at this point – and apart from the fact that we then eat some food (accompanied again by the accordionist) that was the height of the party.

Some light amusement occurred when one of the older village folk stood up to recount (several) stories about how he had shot 30 or so bears during his life.....

The Bear Hunter



.....but apart from that, there was no dancing and little interactivity between the villagers and ourselves!

The most significant thing about the visit to Koli village and to the party, however, was that there was hardly any sign whatsoever of young folk – whether we are talking toddlers, children, or teenagers.

The youngest people at the party were the students that had accompanied us around the park, and most of them were from outwith the area (Helsinki, for example) and were simply studying / working as part of their course at University. This is why we did wonder a wee bit about being told that everything was rosy – because whether the folk we met were artificially planted there, or were genuine “locals” - if there is no youth in the community, then it's not going to develop at all.

The other slightly amusing aspect of the meal was being told that there was going to be “something a bit special” for after the main course -the conclusion must be that tea and biscuits are not that common in Finland!

And finally, the beer. Everyone received a bottle of beer after the tea and biccies. Now, you hear quite a bit about how expensive alcohol is in Scandanavian countries, and that local people prefer to drink in their own homes rather than in public. Bearing in mind that we all received the beer at roughly the same time, it was noted that the locals (without exception) finished theirs *well* before any of us were even half way down the bottle. However, they then stopped, whereas all the visitors recharged their bottles several times!

Anyway, that was pretty much the end of the stay at Koli. The next day, most of the Icelandic and Swedish visitors had gone, and it befell to us Scots to have a day wandering around the Koli park area before departing for Joensuu in a repeat of the marathon journey back to Scotland. However, in defence of Finland, we should say that the hours spent in Helsinki on the way back were well worthwhile. The magnificent cathedrals & churches, the busy harbour area, and the fortified island of Suomenlinna were hugely impressive.

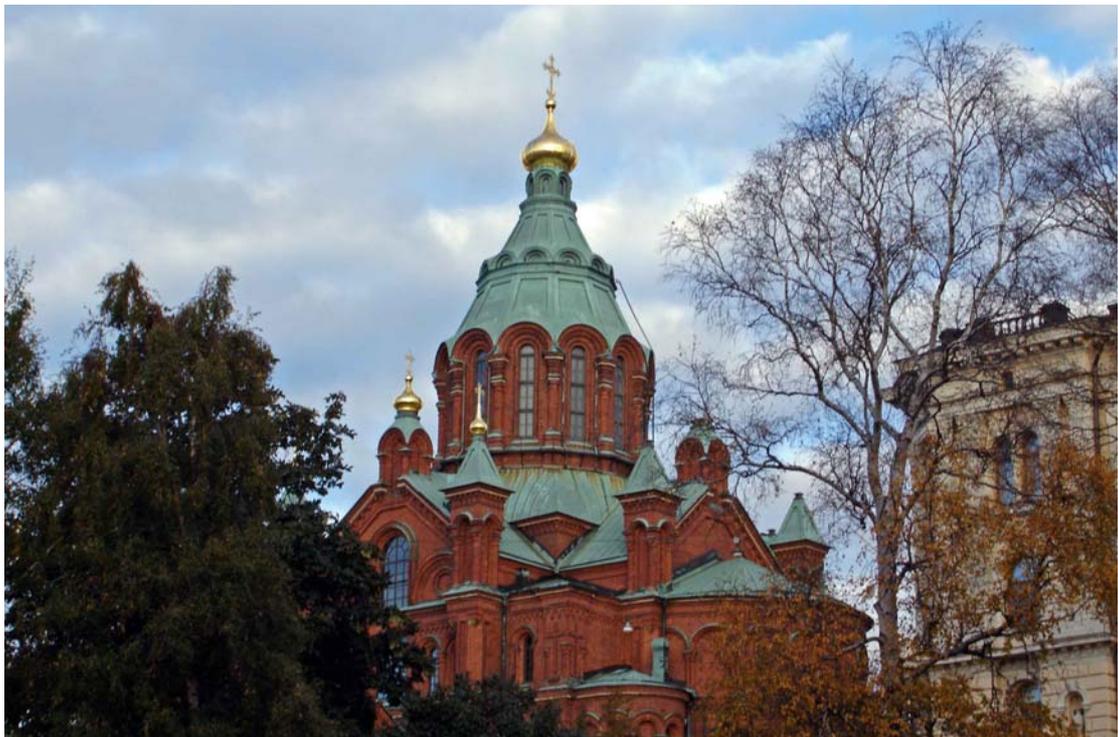
We elected to take a walk from the station to the harbour, then a ferry trip over to the island. The positioning of this was crucial to much of the development of this area, particularly so because it controlled the sea passages past Finland to Russia. To a large extent, if you held Suomenlinna, you could decide who and what sailed up the Gulf of Finland towards St Petersburg.

Some photos follow!

Tuomiokirkko Cathedral



Uspensky Cathedral (Note the Gold Leaf!!!!!!)



Part of the (huge) harbour area



The Art Deco Station



And once we were back home, we had a family break in Edinburgh.....which was OK. Specially since we had no children and no car with us!



East West Home's best.....

Fin!

