


THE REVIEW OF NATIONAL NATURE RESERVES

PROGRESS REPORT continued

Summary

1. In the attached paper the Board is asked to decide the future of Loch Maree National Nature Reserve which is currently on the orange list.
 2. The Board previously agreed with the North Areas Board that further work was required with Loch Maree Islands to confirm its fit with the revised NNR Policy, and it is therefore presently on the orange list. Since then discussions have taken place with the owners of the Reserve with the aim of securing tenure and delivering long term objectives. A willingness now exists among all parties to negotiate a lease which will enable a Loch Maree Islands to be retained as an NNR.
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Action

4. **The Board is asked to approve that Loch Maree Islands remain an NNR, subject to the completion of a satisfactory lease.**

Preparation of this Paper

5. The paper was prepared by Jill Matthews and John Burlison with input from Area staff. It is sponsored by Jeff Watson.

Jill Matthews
John Burlison

Loch Maree Islands - Map 12

Summary

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2. Loch Maree Islands NNR was placed on the orange list because of concerns about the surety of tenure attribute and the purpose of the NNR. NAB considered two papers, the first in April 2000 (NAB/00.2/8a) and the second in February 2003 (NAB/02.5/6). Discussions are currently underway with the landowner about a new lease, so NAB recommend that this NNR should move to the green list subject to completion of a suitable lease.

Location and Ownership

3. The Loch Maree Islands NNR consists of wooded islands situated towards the north-western end of Loch Maree between Kinlochewe and Poolewe in Wester Ross. It comprises three main islands and approximately 60 smaller ones.

One island, Eilean Ruaridh Mor, is owned by Forest Enterprise, the remaining islands are owned by the Mackenzie family of Gairloch and Conon Estates. The NNR was underpinned by NRAs with these owners. The NRA with FE lapsed in 2002, but has been extended for two years until May 2004. The NRA with Gairloch and Conon Estate lapsed in 1998,

[REDACTED]

Designations and Interest

5. The islands support Scots pine, juniper and bog woodland.
- NNR** – The Reserve was declared in 1977.
 - SSSI** – the NNR is part of the larger Loch Maree SSSI, and the islands are a GCR site.
 - Natura 2000** – Loch Maree is an SPA for breeding black throated divers, and a cSAC for Caledonian forest, bog woodland, oligotrophic standing water and otters.
 - Ramsar** – this is a Ramsar site.
 - NSA** – the NNR lies wholly within the Wester Ross National Scenic Area.

The Assessment against the NNR Policy and Proposed Changes

6. The attributes of primacy of nature and best practice were not challenged, and the last Chief Scientist confirmed the national importance of this site. To address the tenure deficiencies, the first paper to NAB put forward four options for the islands owned by Gairloch and Conon Estate
- Option 1 - Renegotiate the NRA
 - Option 2 - Negotiate a lease
 - Option 3 - Purchase the islands
 - Option 4 - De-declare the NNR

7. NAB endorsed the retention of Loch Maree Islands as a NNR subject to satisfactory negotiations on tenure arrangements as outlined in Option 2 of the paper. It was also considered useful to discuss options for sponsored purchase of the land as outlined in Option 3.
8. However, subsequent discussions with the Estate have ruled out the possibility of purchase by SNH. This leaves 2 options from the original paper. Either (a) we proceed with negotiations for a lease and move to the green list, or (b) we conclude that it does not meet the requirements of a NNR and move to the red list prior to de-declaration.
9. The owner and his agent are currently considering the terms of a draft lease to SNH, and the Area are optimistic that a lease can be concluded by autumn 2003. The Area are confident that new arrangements can be worked out with FE, once the other arrangement is resolved.
10. The view of Loch Maree Islands is well known, the NNR is not so well known. This is a sensitive site and has been kept quiet. The Area have also proposed ways to increase national awareness e.g. running daily and carefully managed boat trips in conjunction with the estate, the Loch Maree Hotel and the RSPB, and installing an interpretive panel in FE's car park on the shore of the loch, increasing involvement of local school groups.

Costs and Value for Money

11. This NNR is run by staff from Beinn Eighe, who spend some 10 days pa on the Reserve. One of the fishing ghillies is also an honorary warden.
12. The running costs are small, the NRAs cost only £60 pa. Most equipment is shared with Beinn Eighe, the only additional cost being the three boats.
13. The Utility Score for Loch Maree Islands is currently 52, but this will rise if the improvements noted above are carried out.
14. The costs will increase if the NNR is retained. The lease may cost £4,000 - £6,000. It is not expected that the future practical management of the Loch Maree Islands NNR will incur significantly higher costs than at present. However, raising national awareness will require an input of funds. These would include commissioning an interpretive/educational plan, the recommendations of which would be included within a costed Reserve Plan. Likely recommendations could include a Reserve leaflet (£5K), and off-site interpretive panels (£10K). These costs could be spread over the first 3-5 years of a new Reserve Plan.

Public Relations

15. Although the owner has been ambivalent about NNR status, FE are fully supportive.
16. There would be disappointment if the NNR were to be de-declared, among the wider community and especially amongst keen naturalists and academics at a national level. These are the people at present who realise what a stunning, and uniquely special place the Loch Maree Islands are. There is likely to be a negative reaction from this sector and careful explanation of the justification for any decision to de-declare will be required.

Conclusion and Recommendation

17. The recommendation asked NAB to support the case that Loch Maree Islands should continue as a National Nature Reserve, and that it be moved from its present classification in the orange list of Reserves to the green list, subject to the completion of a suitable lease.
18. NAB endorsed this recommendation and therefore recommend to the Board that Loch Maree Islands should be transferred to the green list subject to the completion of a suitable lease.

The Board are asked to approve that

- **Loch Maree Islands remain an NNR, subject to the completion of a satisfactory lease.**