

Creating future visions for the seas of the Outer Hebrides

Creative workshops report

June 2021



Introduction

This spring, Creative Carbon Scotland (CCS) worked with the MarPAMM - Seas of the Outer Hebrides project team, Taigh Chearsabhagh arts centre in North Uist, and local artist Kirsty O'Connor, to support a series of creative family workshops titled *Seas our Future*.

The activities followed the structure of past, present and future (in Gaelic: *An-dè* - yesterday, *An-diugh's* - today, and *A-Màireach* - tomorrow) relationships to the sea and invited children and adults living across the Outer Hebrides, as well as mainland Scotland, to explore their visions for its future protection.

The sessions complemented ongoing stakeholder engagement around Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the Outer Hebrides, and participants were invited to share their visions through Taigh Chearsabhagh's *Message in a Bottle* project, taking place in the lead-up to COP26 in Glasgow this November.

Through creative activity and conversation, the group explored how islanders' relationships to the sea have changed over time, what aspects are most important to them now, and their visions for its future protection. Over the longer term, we hope this work will contribute towards the development of a community-led vision for the seas and MPAs in the Outer Hebrides.

Workshop activities

We held creative workshops via Zoom on three consecutive Saturdays (22nd & 29th May and 5th June), with participants invited to undertake seaside activities and document the findings on and interactive online “Padlet” between the sessions. Children and adults living across the Outer Hebrides and on mainland Scotland joined us, making fantastic creations and contributions throughout.



Map of participants' favourite places on the sea created on Padlet

Past/An-dè (yesterday)

In the first session, Kirsty invited us to consider past uses of and relationships to the sea in the Outer Hebrides. We began with reflections from Kathleen MacInnes, singer and Gaelic officer at Taigh Chearsabhagh, about the intrinsic connections between Gaelic language and the marine environment, including the many different Gaelic words that describe the colours of the sea.

Kirsty then introduced us to the process of making boats from [flag iris leaves](#), a traditional toy made by children in the Outer Hebrides with links to different cultures around the world stretching as far back as the Vikings. She shared [short videos](#) demonstrating different designs, and we all had the chance to make our own boat.



Designs of iris leaf boats from the Outer Hebrides and Finland

The session concluded with a conversation about participants' stories of their local Outer Hebrides seas in the past, what uses have been lost or continue, and why. Themes that emerged included:

- Childhood memories and family connections to the sea
- Colours of the sea
- Coastal erosion and the need for investment to address it
- Changes in weather patterns
- Increase in marine pollution
- Changing relationships to the sea: ~1000 years ago the islands were part of a complex web of trading routes and exchange; now the sea is seen as more of an obstacle than a connector
- The sea as a provider of employment and connection (physical via transport, and emotional)

Between workshops, we were invited to talk to an older person about their relationship with the sea and any changes they had seen since they were children, and to share these reminiscences at the next session.

Present / An-diugh's (today)

Our second session focused on identifying the things that were most important to us about the sea now and why.

After sharing the stories gathered during the week, we moved into breakout groups to discuss what we love most about the sea and to distil it down to our most important thing, such as:

- Activities: swimming, surfing, eating fish, rowing, kayaking, collecting stones
- Wildlife and habitats: coral reefs and maerl beds, crabs, dolphins, whales, birds (fulmar, puffins), fish stocks

- Wellbeing and aesthetic: smell of the sea air, spiritual connection, inspiration, filming, writing

Next, we set to work making stamps of the things that were most important to us (using materials from a pre-posted art pack), which produced some beautiful images of sea life and activities.



Stamps of our favourite things about the sea, including scallop shells, otters, dolphins, starfish, sperm whales and kayaking

We rounded off with Andy MacKinnon from Taigh Chearsabhagh introducing the [Message in a Bottle](#) project, and Kirsty invited everyone to find a bottle at their local beach, ready to create messages in the final session.

A-Màireach (tomorrow)

Our final session focused on creating future visions for the sea through a series of writing exercises. We began by sharing the findings from our respective beachcombs, including lobster creels, a tree, wellies, bales covered in plastic mesh, a bone – possibly from a whale, and an old metal buoy which was slowly degrading. Kirsty asked us to reflect on how the rubbish we found impacts the marine environment and what it says about our relationship to the ocean.

We then turned to writing our visions for the sea, starting with the statement ‘I wish your sea to be...’ and taking inspiration South Uist poet, Niall Campbell’s poem: [‘The Letter Always Arrives at its Destination’](#). We thought about who we hoped might read our message, what we wanted it to say and how we wanted to communicate it (e.g. in the form of a letter, poem, drawing, pledge.)

We shared an amazing collection of writing, including the following ideas, themes and quotes:

- Curiosity and wonder at the sea; “never dull or empty”
- Energy and constancy, movement
- The sense of wellbeing it provides – rejuvenation, mental and physical
- Supporting sea life – fish, birds, habitats, larvae; “more crabs than creels”

- Clearer, cleaner and more colourful waters
- Addressing marine plastics – not on shoreline; “unfettered by the ghosts of nets” / “more life than plastic”
- Choices, action and care – balancing needs; “not here to tidy up after us” / “we are responsible” / “not webs of greed”
- Coastal erosion; “not stealing your homes” / “departed shorelines”
- Important to acknowledge the difficulties and challenges as well as the positives
- Encompassing different voices and users of the sea; “sometimes fall short of the need to float all the different points of view” / “fishermen, trawlers, drillers, fish farmers, whalers, surfers, sailors, swimmers, consumers”
- Filling the message in a bottle with plastic nurdles; “a message in itself”

All three workshops reflect a high level of passion and care that participants felt for the marine environment and a strong desire to see it protected for generations to enjoy and benefit from in the future.

There was also interest in finding out more about the scientific evidence informing Marine Protected Areas, practical actions participants can take to address the challenges identified and questions about what happens next.

Workshop wrap-up and feedback

To wrap up we thanked everyone for their fantastic contributions and invited them to share reflections including:

- One word reflecting the thing they loved most about the sea
- One word they would use to describe them to a friend



Word cloud reflecting what participants love most about the sea



Word cloud of how participants would describe the workshops to a friend

Pros and cons of digital engagement

This was the first time we had run creative engagement activities online so was the chance for the team to learn more about what worked and what didn't work in a digital context.

The writing exercises in the final workshop seemed to lend themselves particularly well to the online format as did the breakout group discussions, whilst some of the more detailed craft activities were more challenging due to not being able to offer one to one support to participants.

Other benefits and limitations we observed included:

| Pros | Cons |
|--|---|
| Reduced travel (and associated carbon emissions) and potentially reduced time commitment for participants and organisers | Challenges in supporting a mixed age group in an online setting and ensuring that the pace of activities and depth of conversation suited all ages |
| Collaborating with local delivery partners familiar with their audience facilitated higher quality engagement in the themes and in a format that works for the participants. | Challenge to get sufficient core information across about the objectives of the project over a digital platform without compromising the creative and engaging format. |
| Greater reach to a cross-Outer Hebrides audience - previously we have held events in individual locations making it harder to support conversations across the islands | There are natural limitations of screen-based engagement and how long a session can hold people's attention. This included not being able to provide one to one support during more detailed the craft activities |
| Piloting and learning from different methods and platforms such as pre-recorded demonstration videos and Padlet | Less up take on uploading of images, writing and findings to Padlet – this may have been due to unfamiliarity with the platform |

Learning points we'll be considering in future activities include:

- Exploring different types of activities – perhaps supporting a group to meet together over a longer period of time and/or longer in-person sessions such as on the beach
- Considering how the design of activities can support contributions from different ages
- Ensuring a balance between information provided by the MarPAMM – Seas of the Outer Hebrides team and by participants – some of the feedback indicated participants would have liked more information about MPAs
- Considering how to support participants to share their findings and creations via online platforms or other methods of sharing back

Next steps

The MarPAMM – Seas of the Outer Hebrides team thanks everyone who took part and to Kirsty O'Connor and Taigh Chearsabhagh for supporting the design and running of these activities. We are currently processing participant feedback and the ideas generated during the workshops to inform future engagement activities and hope to continue working with the group over the coming months.

In the meantime, participants are encouraged to complete and send their future visions to the [Message in a Bottle](#) project at Taigh Chearsabhagh. Follow the instructions on the page.

Outer Hebrides residents are also invited to watch [this short film](#) with local presenter, Kate Macleod, and share views on how we can protect the marine environment for future generations in this [short survey](#).

MarPAMM – Seas of the Outer Hebrides information

You can explore the network of Marine Protected Areas in the Outer Hebrides at this recently launched [Storymap](#).

More information about the project is available on the [MarPAMM website](#).

For more information about the upcoming creative engagement activities please contact – Gemma Lawrence at gemma.lawrence@creativecarbonscotland.com or Owen McGrath at Owen.McGrath@nature.scot.

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