

CASE STUDY 9.1W

The Scottish Seabird Centre: A visitor attraction based on sustainable tourism principles

Location and background

The Scottish Seabird Centre (SSC) is located on the shores of the Firth of Forth at North Berwick, a small seaside town in the East Lothian region of Scotland, some 20 kilometres east of the capital city of Edinburgh. The SSC is a registered charity and not-for-profit organization, established with the object 'to advance the education of the public concerning the ecology of the natural environment'. The centre attracts about 200 000 visitors every year.

The Prince of Wales officially opened the centre in 2002. Composed of a viewing deck with telescopes, a discovery centre with interactive exhibitions, a 55-seater film auditorium and interactive cameras that visitors can move around to view a range of wildlife on islands in the Firth of Forth, the SSC offers interest for different age groups and levels of interest. The centre also boasts a gift shop and a café with uninterrupted views out to sea.

Funding

The total cost of constructing and fitting out the SSC was £3.2 million. The largest source of funding was drawn from a successful bid to the National Lottery Millennium (£1.47m), with the remaining sum contributed by a partnership consisting of:

- Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothians
- East Lothian Council
- Scottish Natural Heritage
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

In addition, a number of private companies gave sponsorship, donations and entered into in-kind agreements, including Viridor, the Bank of Scotland, Scottish Life Assurance Company, Scottish & Newcastle plc, I & H Brown, Blue Circle Industries plc, Tarmac Quarry Products Ltd, Adobe Systems Europe Ltd and Gardner Graphics. Donations were received from members of the public to support the development, there was a 'buy-a-brick' scheme and various events took place to raise money.

Apart from the initial start-up costs, no grants are received for continual support of the centre. Sources of funding are now reliant on forms of income generation, such as admission fees, surpluses from the café and shop, donations, membership fees, corporate events, private parties and consultancy fees. As such, fundraising is a major occupation for the centre's staff.

The core product: Wildlife viewing

The core product of the SSC is interactive wildlife viewing. The islands of the Firth of Forth offer a seasonal home to

over 300 000 nesting seabirds. Bass Rock is home to the largest island colony of gannets in the world, about 100 000 strong. Viewed from the distance, Bass Rock is white in colour, not from guano but due to the colossal number of birds tightly packed onto the rock! The gannets spend most of the year on Bass Rock, but migrate to the west coast of Africa October–January. The Isle of May (a national nature reserve) and Fidra offer season viewing opportunities of puffins and seals. Bottlenose dolphins and a range of seabirds can be observed through the telescopes on the viewing deck. Visitors are able to observe wildlife, and can rotate, pan and zoom the five remote-controlled cameras, without disturbance to the seabirds. The centre is a world leader in developing the technology required for real-time remote viewing of wildlife, with solar-powered cameras placed on islands requiring minimal maintenance (and therefore minimal disturbance to wildlife), beaming images back to the centre through microwave transmission. The cameras are equipped for the local conditions, being waterproof and each having a windscreen wiper on the lenses so images can still be viewed in wet weather.

The SSC is open 364 days a year and, while seabirds visit the Firth of Forth only on a seasonal basis, there is always something to see through the cameras, as nesting periods for different species are variable. From February to October, visitors can observe the gannetry on Bass Rock; from about April to July, the puffins nest; and during winter, the 200-plus seal colony on the Isle of May makes for fascinating viewing.

An attraction based on sustainable principles

The SSC offers a good example of an environmentally focused attraction, operating on sustainable principles from its design and construction through to its daily management of operations.

The concept of regeneration

Constructed on the site of a lido, closed for many years since the town's popularity as a domestic seaside resort declined, the design of the centre aims to enhance the seafront and improve an area in need of regeneration. North Berwick was once a favoured resort, but it fell into the typical pattern of UK domestic resort decline once foreign package holidays became available to the mass market in the 1970s. The opening of the centre and its attraction to visitors has assisted in the gradual regeneration of North Berwick, providing a source of new visitors to the town, a much-desired boost to the local economy and a subsequent improvement in the town centre. Seasonal effects are not so keenly felt, as the centre is open throughout the year.

Design and construction process

The futuristic design focused on environmentally sound principles has won awards. Locally sourced construction materials were specified where possible to reduce the effect of transporting materials to the site; for example, cement came from Dunbar, just ten miles away. The building is highly insulated and mostly naturally ventilated. Internally, natural larch timber trusses and beechwood were used while, externally, Scottish larch timber cladding and dry stone walling using rock from a local quarry (and constructed by a local craftsman) are a feature. The building is on two levels, with the lower level cut into underlying rock, and it has a distinctive copper roof.

Operations management

A number of environmental management practices are routine at the SSC, including energy conservation, waste minimization and waste recycling. The café serves fair trade tea and coffee, and a range of food from local suppliers. Visitors are encouraged to use public transport to the centre through the provision of a combined rail travel and admission package from Edinburgh in conjunction with First ScotRail. However, changing visitor travel behaviour is difficult and most visitors still arrive by car.

The local community and economy

The original concept for the centre was derived from members of the local community, eager to rejuvenate a key area of the town. The initiative continues to enjoy a strong degree of community support and involvement, with about 60 volunteers. Membership of the Friends scheme allows free entry to the centre and about 5000 people are now enrolled. The centre has established good links with local schools and hosts educational visits, offering an environmental studies pack for pupils aged 5–14 working towards levels C, D and E of the school curriculum. The centre acts as an important community facility, providing an informal meeting place in the café, a place for local involvement in conservation activities, a venue for children's parties and festivals, and even a small cinema, making use of the auditorium outside opening hours. In terms of employment, the centre directly employs the full-time equivalent of 35 local residents and indirectly supports 30 jobs in the local economy. It injects over £1 million per annum in to the local economy.

Successes

Since opening, the Scottish Seabird Centre has won 18 prestigious awards, the most prestigious of which include:

- VisitScotland Green Tourism Business Gold Award
- five-star attraction grading from VisitScotland
- VisitScotland Thistle Award 2002, Tourism and the Environment category
- Investor in People award, for a commitment to training and customer care, 2002
- Queen's Award for Enterprise in Sustainable Development 2004
- finalist in the British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow Awards 2001
- Taste of Scotland Award
- Best Web Site 2002, Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions
- Winner of Civic Trust Award 2001 Quality and Appearance of Environment category
- Winner of Environmental Regeneration of Scotland Award 2000.

Celebrity endorsements have helped to raise the profile of the centre's work, including those of Bill Oddie, Ronnie Corbett, Tony Soper and Chris Packham.

New developments

Renewal and innovation is a key concept for all visitor attractions, and the SSC is no exception. In fact, innovation is the key to the success of the SSC. A new development for the centre includes the renovation of a disused building adjacent to the existing centre, which will provide interpretation of the marine environment and conservation issues. New technology will include a live underwater camera and a live satellite tracking system. There are also plans to transmit images from wildlife sites from further afield. The new wing will incorporate a working demonstration of solar/wind power, which will supply green energy to the centre, as well as classroom space for educational visits and exhibition space. The aim of this new development is to encourage people to engage in practical environmental activities.

Web link

The web page for the SSC is www.seabird.org. It provides information on getting to the centre, admission prices, games, postcards, educational material on the wildlife and access to live web cams.

Click on the link and view the seabirds for yourself!