



*Glen Coutts*

## **Being in Place: Environmental art and tourism in Scotland**

Figure 1. The Seventeenth Legion. Route 7 NCN, Kilmacolm. Sculpture by David Kemp. Photo: Glen Coutts.

## Scotland and Finland: The importance of art in the natural environment

For a small country, Scotland has an extraordinarily varied landscape, ranging from remote islands and wilderness spaces to rich farmland and beautiful coastlines. Indeed, these factors led to Scotland being voted ‘the most beautiful country in the world’ by *Rough Guide* readers, stating ‘Who can deny that these wild beaches, deep lochs and craggy castles are some of the most wonderful and beautiful sights in the world?’ (Rough Guides, 2017). There can be no doubt that the landscape is one of the main attractions that draws so many visitors to the country:

*Scotland’s landscape is an essential tourism asset [...] Along with history, heritage and culture, Scotland’s landscape plays an integral role in building desire and inspiration for visitors both domestic and international to travel. [...] The rural experience in Scotland can also help to harness a desire for both physical and spiritual wellness. With connections with both nature and wilderness, Scotland’s rural landscape offer endless opportunities to promote both a physical and mental detox from fast paced living*  
(Visit Scotland, 2017a, p. 6.)

In some respects, Scotland is similar to Finland, a population of around 5 million people, large areas of sparsely populated land, thriving forestry industry and many lakes (or lochs as they are known in Scotland). We have far fewer saunas per head of population than Finland, but we do value our rich natural heritage every bit as much as the Finns. Despite trying to shake off an unenviable reputation as ‘the sick person of Europe’ (due to historically poor diet and high alcohol consumption) the value of the natural environment is increasingly recognised by Scots and visitors alike for exercise and wellbeing. The landscape, outdoor spaces and related activities are, in both countries, real ‘selling points’ for the tourism industry. While the natural environment and outdoor activity are recognised by the main agency for tourism in Scotland, as major attractions for visitors it must also be remembered that:

*Whilst tourists come to Scotland to experience the scenery, landscapes, history and culture, 23% of visitors reported being attracted to Scotland to get away from it all.* (Visit Scotland, 2017b, p. 11.)

Of course, there are huge differences between the two countries, not least in language, culture and land mass, but in one respect we have a lot in common; a love and respect for the natural environment and, I suggest, an increasing confluence between art, culture, the outdoor experience and tourism. This is manifest in so-called 'experience tourism' in Finnish Lapland and, as I will discuss in this short essay, the trend in Scotland toward art in outdoor and rural places, such as parks and walking or cycling trails, art that is rather different to the kind of public art one might expect to see in cities and towns. It is a phenomenon the potential of which we are only just beginning to tap – the potential benefits of environmental art not only to tourism, but also to physical and mental wellbeing.

### **Art and public space in Scotland**

Glasgow is Scotland's largest city and its transformation from 'second city of the Empire', known for heavy engineering and shipbuilding to *European City of Culture* 1990 and *City of Architecture and Design* 1999 is well known (The Glasgow Story, 2017). The city is now recognised as a destination for 'cultural tourism' with its architectural and cultural treasures (museums, galleries, public art and green spaces) key attractions for both Scottish and international visitors. Ironically, many of the museums, galleries and buildings were established when Glasgow was at its most prosperous, during the period 1830 – 1914. Visitors to the city today will be able to visit the galleries and parks (there are more than 90 parks) to experience the City's rich industrial and cultural heritage and almost all are free to enter. Public art in Glasgow plays an important, but often overlooked, role as in many cityscapes. Visitors are more likely to pay attention to the art in public spaces than the locals, for whom it has become so familiar, it goes almost unnoticed. You have to look for public art in cities. While there is a huge variety of public art in Glasgow, ranging from the usual large-scale Victorian bronze commemorative statues of figures (usually men) on horses to small-scale humorous sculptures by contemporary artists (Community Walks, 2017) much of it goes unnoticed most of the time. The art works in public spaces are all bound by the physical context in which they are situated; in a city square, by the riverside or on the side of a building.

Since the 1960s, a different trend has emerged, in the realm of public art, that is not tied up with the urban *context* – environmental art. In this situation works may be

made in parks, hills, riverbanks, coastlines or mountains; remote or even completely inaccessible places. This is still public art, it is not confined to a museum or gallery or some private patron's wall. It is art for everybody and the context in which it exists is every bit as important as its urban relative, perhaps more so. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of these works in Scotland, but I will take just one example as an illustration. The work is located in a forest in the north east of Scotland, part of a 'sculpture trail' which was established in 1998, it now consists of more than 20 works of environmental art. *Modern Nature* is a work that contains six aluminium poles (For images, see Google. (2017b), grouped like trees, the work was ordered by the Forestry Commission, described in their report *Connecting People, Art and Environment* as follows:

*The sound of the male capercaillie, now extinct from the area, is used to draw attention to sound in the landscape, both natural (wind, birds, insects, water) and man made (planes, cars, machinery). The capercaillie call makes a link with the past history of the area, drawing attention to the impact of people on the landscape. Light is trapped and transformed to power the hidden sound unit. Consequently, the frequency of the bird call is dependent on the amount of sunlight, thus the work constantly responds to natural change in the environment. (2009, p. 5.)*

The contrast between this sort of work and that situated in an urban setting is, I hope, clear. To experience this environmental artwork, you need to be active, to walk, hike or climb outdoors; you must be *in the place*. This is a key dimension of environmental art in this essay. In Scotland, partly as a result of the political health and wellbeing agenda, outdoor activities are being encouraged and, in my view, the link between art and tourism is worth much further research and development.

### **Trails, paths, parks and festivals**

Scotland's reputation for green spaces and parks is well known and gardening generally is a very popular hobby in Scotland, but there are situations where the lines between gardening and art have become quite blurred. Some artists have created stunning

gardens that have become tourist attractions in their own right (Finlay, 2018; Jencks, 2009; Sheeler, 2003). The idea of artists working with nature has a long tradition, but contemporary artists working in the landscape are finding new ways of making connections with the natural environment.

A group called *Sustrans* established the *National Cycle Network* (NCN), a United Kingdom charitable organisation set up more than 40 years ago that aims to promote safe and sustainable transport links across the countries of the UK. It maintains a national network of cycle trails and paths that offer safe transport options. *Sustrans* has become one of the largest patrons of environmental art and art in rural contexts in the UK (Sustrans, 2017). It is not uncommon to come across site specific art as one walks or cycles, as you can see from Figures 1 and 2.

Outdoor sculpture trails and parks have also grown in popularity in Scotland, in addition to the one I mentioned previously at Tyrebagger, for example at *The Trossachs* and *Loch Lomond National Park* (2017), *Loch Ard* (2017) and *Caol Ruadh* (Scottish Sculpture Park, 2017) to mention just a couple. All of this activity points to a clear link between outdoor activity, tourism and art in Scotland, it is something that has developed over the years but that has not necessarily been carefully planned. I believe there is potential, perhaps even an urgency, to coordinate between agencies and to maximise benefits for future generations. There are encouraging signs from the national agencies (*Creative Scotland* and *Visit Scotland*) that this is beginning to happen.

Artists working in the natural environment draw inspiration for many sources, including the history and culture of the place. In one example, the artist Diane McLean used a poem, Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* as her point of inspiration to develop a temporary installation capable of being relocated in different sites within a particular area. It used art, music and poetry to 'say' something about the place. Sounds of a lament and spoken verse immerse the viewer. In this case, as in the others I have mentioned, the viewer has to get to and be *in the place* (Forestry Commission, 2009, p. 10; McLean, 2017).

To conclude this sort of essay, I want to turn briefly to another important phenomenon in Scotland; festivals. There are festivals for music, food, storytelling, comedy and film; you name it and there is probably a festival for it in Scotland. Possibly the best known of these is the *Edinburgh Festival Fringe*, the largest arts festival in the world.





Figure 2. the Flintstone Flyer. Route 7, NCN, Lochwinnoch.  
Sculpture by Dave Halliday. Photo: Cosmo Blake.

Given all that I have said about the growth of environmental art, it is surprising to note that the *Environmental Art Festival Scotland* (EAFS), established in 2013, is a relatively recent addition to the festivals calendar. At the time of writing (February 2018) two events have been hosted in the south west of Scotland. The events:

*... involved over 50 multidisciplinary environmental art projects which use a local context to explore global issues of environmental consciousness and land. Exploring ways for future living and thinking.* (EAFS, 2017)

I have offered just a few examples of the trends that are going on in environmental art related to tourism in Scotland, art trails, art on cycle tracks and walkways, in dedicated parks or in remote locations. A common factor in all of these is that some sort of human effort is involved; getting to the place, walking or cycling, running or climbing,

it is an active engagement with the place. Of course, such phenomena are not unique to Scotland, there are sculpture parks and 'fitness trails' all over the world, but what is interesting from the point of view of this publication is that professionals in art and culture are increasingly recognised as partners with the tourist industry (Visit Scotland, 2017a; 2017b). A challenge will be developing responsible tourism and sustainable art in locations of outstanding natural beauty in a sensitive and ethical manner.

Returning to my theme and the title of this essay 'being in place', environmental art at its best works with, for and through, the natural environment. Intrinsically multi-faceted, it can be large-scale and (relatively) permanent or it can be small-scale and ephemeral, but it is always about being *in place* and never 'out of place'.

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