Groundwork for Slow Tourism Project - Final report

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Groundwork for Slow Tourism Project - Final report

Executive Summary

In February - March 2021, North West Highlands Geopark Ltd delivered a project to provide a platform for communities and other stakeholders to consider options for working together to solve some of the challenges associated with high visitor volumes.

This project was supported by NatureScot, through the Better Places Green Recovery Fund. Activities included:

- an online workshop bringing stakeholders together to consider collaborative planning,
- a consultation with the local community around Durness to better understand their concerns/aspirations for SmooCave, and;
- commissioning a formal STEAM report (an industry standard economic impact modelling tool for the North West Highlands Geopark region.

These activities were carried out to cultivate a more positive and proactive culture around planning for higher visitor numbers in ways that protect, celebrate and conserve the things that make the North West Highlands Geopark unique and special.

The project identified that visitor volumes have increased by around 10% since 2010 but the length of stay has decreased by about 7%. It also documented evidence of the increasing strain on the capacity of communities to welcome increasing visitor volumes, particularly as poor visitor behavior is often raised as a concern.

Research demonstrated that communities and organisations including the public sector would like to work together to solve these issues. However, although good solutions were proposed, currently there is no mechanism to facilitate cooperation in the Geopark region.

This report highlights the opportunity for the Geopark management body to promote the Geopark to Destination Planners and Managers as a unique and special place to live and visit.

There is also an opportunity for the Geopark Managers to set up a working group that will prepare a set of heritage based objectives that will help alleviate visitor pressures and contribute to wider destination planning efforts in Sutherland and Wester Ross.

Community consultation and stakeholder interviews around Smoo Cave reported concerns about parking, litter and poor visitor behaviour and aspirations for better visitor information provision, light-touch management and development of heritage interpretation tools.

North West Highlands Geopark Ltd commends the results of the Smoo Cave study to the site's managers at the Highland Council and the Community of Durness and extends an offer to work with them in the development of visitor information provision and heritage interpretation for the site.

A set of six recommendations can be found at the end of this report.

The North West Highlands Geopark

The North West Highlands Geopark Ltd is a Charity that manages the UNESCO Global Geopark designation for a 2000km^2 area of the North West Highlands (Figure 1).

A UNESCO Global Geopark is not a legislative designation in the UK, but it does provide international recognition for the area. The charity actively engages with local people and partner organisations to look after heritage and use it to support sustainable development. Directors and staff are mainly rooted in the local community, and their vision is for the North West Highlands to become:

"a thriving and sustainable rural economy capitalising on the assets and people of the Geopark in partnership with local government, relevant agencies and local businesses".

Figure 1 - The North West Highlands Geopark

For seventeen years the organisation has been the only body working across the whole geography of the North West Highlands with a specific focus on the heritage and sustainable development of just this area. The charity has a responsibility to its communities and to their heritage to ensure that its activities result in positive outcomes. In recent years, it has become increasingly aware of the concerns of its communities around the pressures of high visitor volumes, both socially and environmentally.

Part One: The economic impacts and trends of tourism in the North West Highlands Geopark

Global Tourism Solutions has been commissioned to produce a report on economic activity for the area bounded by North West Highlands Geopark and its gateway towns. GTS use the STEAM tourism economic impact modelling process which utilises local supply side data and tourism performance and visitor survey data collection to generate a series of impact analyses. Although the full database contains much more detailed information which will be used and investigated for future research and planning activities, this summary will take into consideration the number of visitors over time (2010 - 2019) and the economic impact of tourism to the area. The 2020 season was exceptional due to the Covid-19 pandemic and so research should be repeated in 2022 to assess the impact of multiple lockdowns, vaccination programs and staged opening of society. The STEAM report estimates that in 2019 the Geopark had 216,900 visitors; 22.5% of those were day visitors. Of the remaining 77.5% staying visitors, most were staying in serviced accommodation. In 2010 the park had 206,600 visitors and 84.3% of these were staying ones. The overall trend since 2010 is upwards, since day visitor numbers in the Geopark consistently rise from year to year, with a jump in 2019 (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Day Visitors from 2010 - 2019. All graphs in this section are from the STEAM report for the North West Highlands Geopark, reproduced with permission from Global Tourism Solutions (UK) Ltd

The dip in overall numbers in 2018 (203,300) (Figure 3) is therefore due to staying visitors (Figure 4), either fewer of them, or visitors staying in the area for less time.

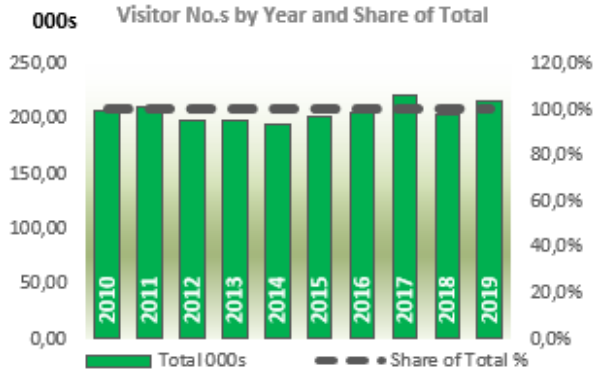

Figure 3 - Overall Visitors from 2010 - 2019

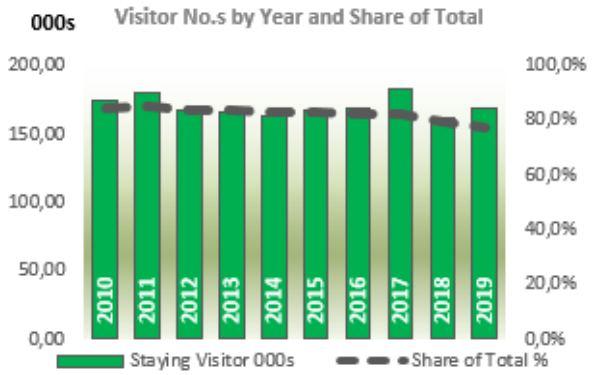

Figure 4 - Staying Visitors from 2010 - 2019

Visitor days take into account the time people are staying in the area i.e. three visitors staying two nights would generate six visitor days. This provides an estimate of 562,800 visitor days in the area in 2019, while there were 608,800 of them in 2010 (Figure 5). This means that visitors are staying less in the area. On average, staying visitors stay for just over three days in the area.

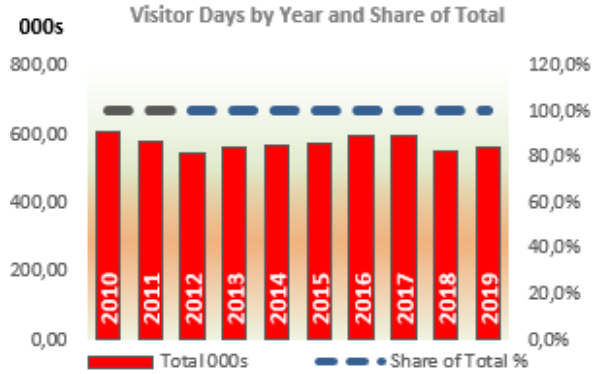

Figure 5 - Visitor days from 2010 - 2019

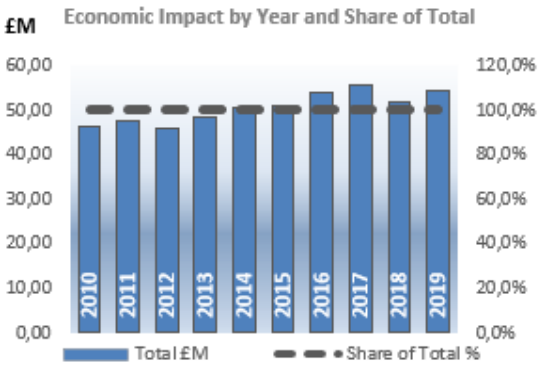

Figure 6 - Economic impact from 2010 - 2019

In terms of the economic impact of tourism (Figure 6), 562,800 visitor days generated close to £55m in 2019, the majority of this (96,6%) being generated by staying visitors to the area. The economic impact has been increasing steadily since 2010 (Figure 5), where it was estimated to be £46.42m. The only dip was in 2018, but cannot be referred to as a general trend, given that the previous year and the following one were quite successful and therefore in contrast with 2018. Data shows that tourism is tied to seasonality, with peak months being July and August in the reporting period (2010 - 2019). Figures 7 and 8 show the distribution of economic and visitor numbers impacts by month in 2019.

According to the STEAM report, within the Geopark, tourism supports 1,096 FTE jobs.

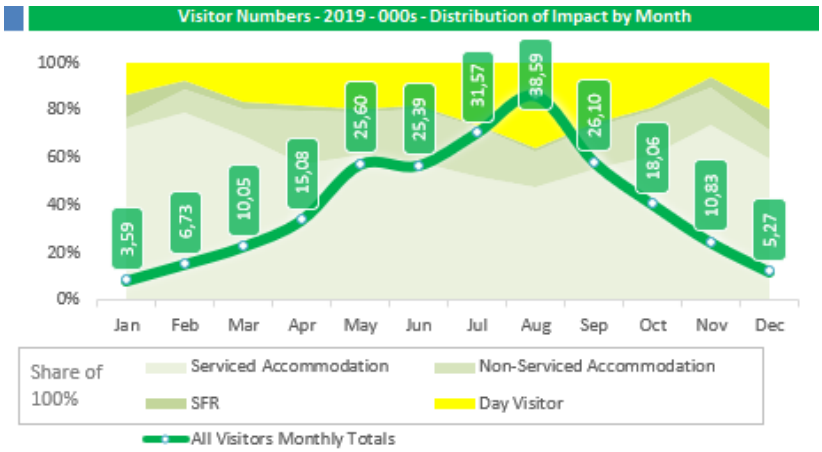

Figure 7 - Visitor numbers Distribution of impacts in 2019

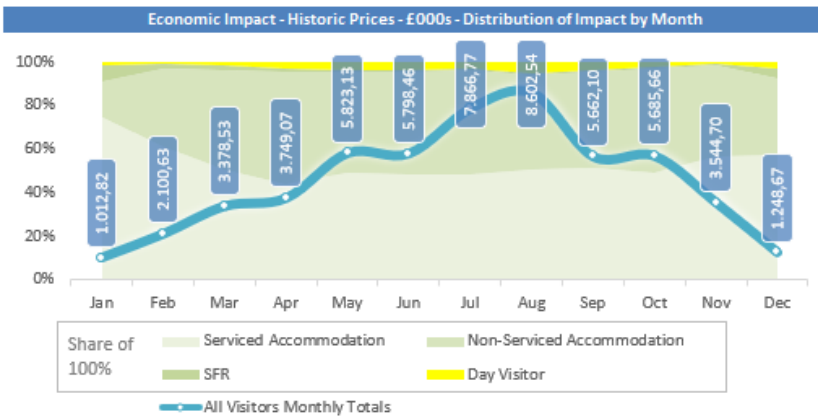

Figure 8 - Economic impact distribution of impact in 2019

Part Two: Smoo Cave case-study

Background

The Geopark management body has understood for some time that Smoo Cave is under intense pressure from visitors. Following the scheduled revalidation mission to assess the North West Highlands UNESCO Global Geopark status in 2019, UNESCO suggested the Geopark team work on options to improve Smoo Cave - as an obvious key visitor attraction. They recommended improvements to the parking and the development of self-guided walking trails in the area around the site. The site is owned by The Highland Council and so there are a number of stakeholders who they may wish to engage with in decision making around the management of Smoo Cave and the Geopark management body is just one of these. It was recognised that consultation with other stakeholders and careful consideration of options would be necessary before any momentum could be built, and indeed it may not be appropriate for the Geopark management to lead the process. Therefore, stakeholder interviews and community surveys were conducted to identify any initial solutions which can then be disseminated more widely to identify collaboration opportunities. A detailed understanding of visitor perceptions was not possible within the timescale of this project, but an online presence survey was conducted to get an outline understanding. A secondary outcome of this work is to test a model that could be used for developing collaborative visitor management at other visitor hotspots in the Geopark.

Context

Smoo Cave is undoubtedly a star attraction of the North West Highlands Geopark and the North Coast 500 (Figure 9). Receiving in excess of 70,000 visitors per year, it is estimated that one third of all visitors to the Geopark stop there. This compares to just 10% of visitors who stop at Knockan Crag NNR, the site promoted the most by the Geopark management organisation.

This impressive limestone cave has developed within the Sangomore Formation of the Durness Group of sediments of Cambro-Ordovician age. A combination of underground cave formation and coastal erosion, the largest chamber leads into further chambers which contain waterfalls and a small pool. A large geo (‘geodha’ in Gaelic) or cleft connects the cave with the sea. With an entrance which is at least 30 metres wide this is one of the largest cave entrances in Britain. Inside, the main chamber is 15m high and is floodlit.

Smoo Cave is important as an archaeological site and contains a large multi period shell midden dating from the Mesolithic through to the Iron Age. This is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument by Historic Environment Scotland.

The locality is an important resource for students, researchers and the general public. There is a lot of potential for further interpretation.

The site is open 365 days a year; public access is via a walkway into the waterfall chamber, free of charge. The steep steps down to the cave mean that a good level of fitness is required and there is no disabled access to the cave itself. A shorter walk above the cave looking down into the waterfall chamber is more accessible for visitors with reduced mobility.

Fraser Eadie, Smoo Cave Tours's owner, is the only tourism business operating in the cave. He offers guided tours both by boat and by walking in June, July, August (10am – 5pm) and in April, May, Sept, Oct (11am – 4pm)

The cave is owned and maintained by Highland Council who have provided the following public facilities along the cliff top (Figure 10):

- Public toilets
- Picnic / interpretation area
- Viewing bridge over the sinkhole waterfall
- Car park
- Coach park (further along road)

Figure 9 - The NC500 in Sutherland. https://www.northcoast500.com/explore-the-route/sutherland/

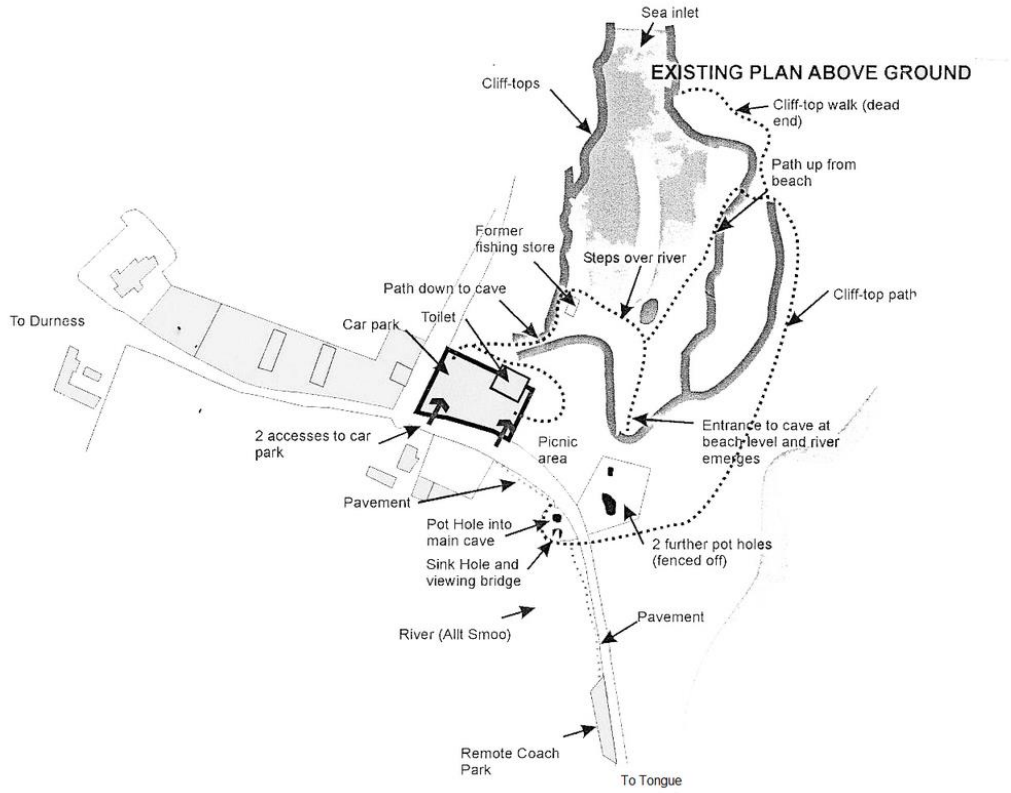

Figure 10 - The Public Facilities. http://www.smoocavetours.com/cave-layout.html

Smoo Cave's online presence

At the time of writing, there are about 89,400 results on google for "Smoo Cave". The first result is for Visit Scotland's website, but this does not appear to have been updated since 2013. Similarly there are other visitor-oriented websites listed on google's top hits that have not been updated since 2015 and earlier. VisitScotland and VisitBritain both include Smoo Cave in their North Coast 500 itineraries but neither of these websites provide information on parking or facilities etc. The Smoo Cave hotel and Altnaharra hotel websites do include

information to help visitors. Several websites reference the now closed Durness tourist information centre to get advice to plan a visit.

To attempt to understand the visitor perception of Smoo Cave, the following social media will be included in the site's online presence analysis:

- Facebook
- Trip Advisor
- Instagram
- Youtube

Facebook

If looking at the site's online presence on Facebook, two are the groups that should be taken into consideration to find out what people are saying about it:

- Durness, public group, 821 members
- NC500, public group, 50.998 members
- Smoo Cave Tours, company page, 13 likes

The first one includes both local and tourists and posts are mainly related to the area's photographic and video content. The group had 10 posts published on Smoo Cave between 2019 and 2020. Most of these include photos and videos of the site. No relevant comments were left in terms of visitors' pressure or any other issues related to overcrowding.

The second group is not official and therefore not managed by the North Coast 500 Limited. The group was created to share tips and photos and ask information related to the route. 65 are the posts published on Smoo Cave between 2019 and 2020. Most of these highlight the site's beauty and how it is definitely one of the hotspots to stop by during the route. Reading through the comments left to the posts it is however possible to identify what the main issues linked to the site are:

- limited car parking capacity
- overcrowding
- stairs inside the cave makes it not accessible to people with reduced mobility.

Here is an example of informal visitor management happening in a Facebook post in the NC500 group referring to the car park (Figure 11). The user suggests parking at the village hall car park (2 minutes walk) instead of the roadside, which makes it more dangerous.

Figure 11 - Post on the NC500 group highlighting car park issues at the site.

Finally, SmooCaveTours is a facebook page run by the owner of the tour company. The page has 13 likes and no relevant posts/comments were identified.

Trip Advisor

Smoo Cave on Trip Advisor is indicated as the 5th of 19 things to do in Durness. It is also marked as “Travellers Choice 2020”. The site has 1,120 reviews and 1,066 photos were updated by visitors (Figure 13).

Figure 12 - Smoo Cave on Trip Advisor.

Interestingly, most visitors who rated the site as being “average” did not take the tour. Most comments define it a nice place in a nice scenery, but nothing more. “Worth a quick stop” if driving along the NC500.

Some examples (Figure 12):

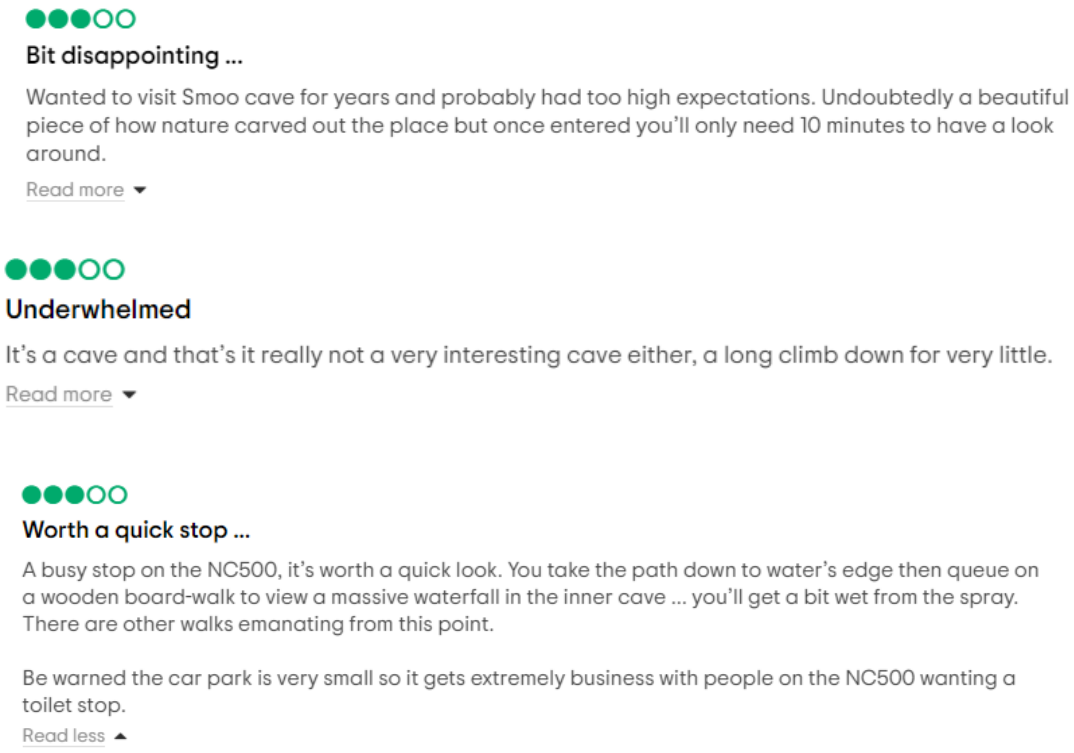

Figure 13 - Examples of "average" rated reviews of the site on Trip Advisor.

Smoo Cave is also a popular mention in the reviews left to the North Coast 500 but do not include any relevant/negative comments.

Instagram

Concerning the site’s presence on Instagram, no specific destination pages were found. Smoo Cave Tours has its own page: https://www.instagram.com/smoocavetours/, but the profile does not appear to be kept up to date and does not seem to be popular among visitors (27 posts and 56 followers). It is easily verifiable that Smoo Cave is a popular tourist attraction

with 8.430 posts using the hashtag #smoocave and top posts reaching up to 500 likes (Figure 14).

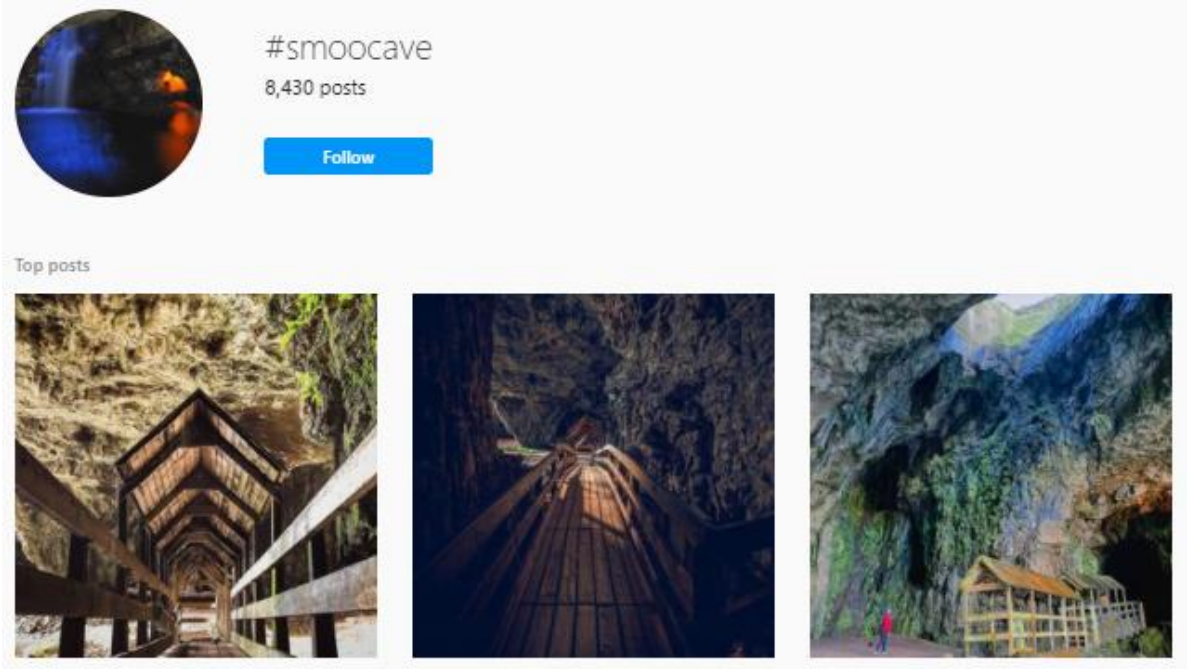

Figure 14 - 3 "top posts" by popularity using the hashtag #smoocave on Instagram.

Engagement rises significantly when looking for Smoo Cave as a location on Instagram. Top posts tagging at Smoo Cave have an average of 2,000 likes, with one post shared by the official Visit Scotland account reaching almost 36,000 likes. Here are two examples of posts using Smoo Cave as location: one by Visit Scotland, one by “UK hidden gems” (Figure 15).

Figure 15a - Two examples of Smoo Cave popular posts on Instagram.

Figure 15b - Two examples of Smoo Cave popular posts on Instagram.

Youtube

No great engagement/presence on Youtube was identified by the present analysis. However, a few travel vloggers posted a video of a visit to the site as part of their NC500 trip. One example is "Shaun", a video blogger from Scotland who also collaborated with Visit Scotland to promote tourist attractions across the country. Shaun has posted a video of his visit to Smoo Cave in May 2019. The video has almost 14,000 views, more than 1,000 likes and 200 comments.

The aim of this online presence analysis was to find out what people are saying about Smoo Cave, if and how the site is officially promoted and if any specific issues are highlighted in users' generated content (UGC).

Summary

The short research has highlighted that:

There's only one tour agency operating in the area: Smoo Cave Tours, which has both a Facebook and Instagram page, not oriented towards the promotion of the site;

- Visitors who do not take the guided tour are more eager to define the cave as a "worth quick stop" along the NC500. The ones taking the tour appreciate the site more in terms of its natural and geological value;
- The principal issues identified related to the site include parking issues, overcrowding and accessibility problems;
- National tourism boards do promote the site, but with little information to help visitors plan;
- Visitors have to work hard to understand the parking/access issues pre-arrival;
- No local authorities/ local tourism boards are committed to promoting the site, nor the area (Durness or Sutherland);
- Smoo Cave has great visibility on all social networks taken into consideration: Facebook, Instagram, Tripadvisor and Youtube;
- Instagram particularly reaches the highest number of users.

Community consultation

The aim of this process was to understand the wishes of local communities and to help establish whether the North West Highlands Geopark could help to develop solutions to address visitor impacts and improve local and visitor experiences

Key stakeholders - Interviews report

Introduction

In order to understand what the concerns and aspirations for Smoo Cave are, 5 pilot interviews were conducted with key stakeholders. The interviews were held online from 19th February to 3rd March 2021.

The key stakeholders identified were the following:

- Hugh Morrison, Highland Council Councillor and owner of Smoo Cave Hotel;
- Fraser Eadie, owner of Smoo Tours;
- Donald Mitchell, High Life Highland Ranger;
- Alastair Stewart, , The Highland Council, Development & Infrastructure Service.
- Neil Fuller, Durness Community Company

The method applied was the one of semi-structured interviews. This is to give freedom to respondents to talk about what is relevant to him/her, but at the same time a loose structure ensures that all relevant topics are covered. The interviewees were asked their permission to record the conversation, being advised that this would not be published but would just help in the process of summarizing the interviews. 3 out of 5 respondents agreed to be recorded.

The following questions served as a ground in all interviews:

- What is your relationship with the place? What does your work involve?
- Tourism to the area: what is it like now? and how did it change over the last 6/7 years?
- What do you think are the main issues caused by the high number of visitors?
- How do you see Smoo Cave in 10 years? How would you like to see it?

According to who was being interviewed, questions were then adapted and further ones were added to better understand interviewees' perspectives on the site. Particularly, Alastair Stewart was asked the following questions given his role and experience:

- You and your role in the Highland Council. What is your / the Highland Council role related to the site?
- To what extent is Smoo Cave a priority?
- What do you think the main issues are?
- Does the council have plans?
- Do you know Fraser Eadie? Is the Council in contact with him?
- Do you think a more local management group closer to the site but in connection to the Highland Council would be a good idea?
- What do you think about a potential community land buyout?

Analysis of the results

First of all, it needs to be outlined that 4 out of 5 respondents are Durness residents, while 1 is based in Inverness (Alastair Stewart). When asked about their relationship to the place the 5 residents stressed how Smoo Cave has been part of their life for a very long time and how they all saw his attractiveness growing over the years until becoming one of the top attractions in the Scottish Highlands**.** Hugh Morrison owns a hotel, the Smoo Cave Hotel, which is located basically in front of it. Donald Mitchell is an employee of High Life Highland and as part of his work he is responsible for guided walks which sometimes include Smoo Cave. Fraser is the owner of Smoo Cave tours, the only business operating at the site. He runs geological tours lasting approximately 20 mins, from April to October. When he's not operating, Fraser works in the cave digging.

As part of his work at the development and infrastructure service department, Alastair looks after rural and tourist sites in the Highlands, and these include Smoo Cave.

Tourism to the area

When asked to comment on the development of tourism to the area, all respondents agreed there has been a huge increase in visitor numbers over the last 6/7 years. The mentioned numbers were approximately 70,000 visitors per year. According to the interviewees, what makes Smoo Cave so popular is that it is a freely accessible site. However, this increase was mainly due to the launching of the North Coast 500 in 2015, and today Smoo Cave is referred to as a "must stop" along the route. One respondent estimates that around 70% of the population in the area relies on tourism from an economic point of view. This percentage would not include those who benefit indirectly from it.

It was also highlighted that Durness has no "Visit Scotland" infopoint as there used to be, nor the whole Sutherland area. One interviewee stressed how an infopoint might be of great interest to the area, as visitors would have a place to go to ask information about what the area offers, making them stop longer. He also said:

'We need to get something like a Visit Highland to replace them so we can attract people to the Highlands and then once they're here, we can let them discover them at a deeper level'

Another interviewee pointed out that the area lacks accommodations to cope with the high number of visitors, and this would not be just a local problem but at a more regional level in the Highlands. This leads to more and more visitors renting a campervan for their holiday, and consequently to major traffic issues on a road infrastructure that was not built for such volumes of vehicles. Another consequence is that tourists do wild camping in the village:

'Right in the middle of the village who shouldn't shouldn't really be camping. For my own house, we counted 22 tents, with campfires burning in the grass and squashing wild flowers. And of course, human feces all over the place. We would expect someone doing something about this.'

One respondent explained that he regularly cleans up after tourists in the summer. After finding human feces in a pair of trainers he strongly felt that the problem lies with people who come camping for the first time and get caught out. They don't know what to do so resort to

these kinds of behaviours. They need to connect with the right information to be able to behave responsibly.

It was also noted that it is sometimes difficult to reach the Highland Council because the institution covers a large area and Durness has only 300 residents. Interestingly, one respondent thinks that the local community should bring together and share a common vision in order to refer to the Highland Council which major issues should be faced in the area:

'I think that we need to have more joined up thinking on what we do relating to tourism'.

Main issues
The interviews highlighted the following major issues caused by visitor pressure to the site:

- Lack of appropriate car park facilities;
- Lack of chemical disposals, freshwater and disposable rubbish facilities;
- Litter-related issues in the cave;
- Deterioration of the path and fences.

Lack of appropriate car park facilities
The car park at Smoo Cave is very tiny and cannot cope with the high number of tourists. This often leads to cars and campervans parking aside the road (see figure 10). Two interviewees highlighted how Durness has parking facilities in a walking distance from the cave and how leading visitors there would ease pressure on the site's car park. However, tourists should be aware of this possibility and it should therefore be made clear by installing boards and signs, says one respondent. Another suggestion was to expand the parking facilities and investigate improving footpaths between the cave car park and other car parks within walking distance.

Lack of chemical disposals, freshwater and disposable rubbish facilities
It was mentioned before that a lot of tourists have a campervan. Although this compensates the lack of accommodation, it also results in the need of certain facilities that allows their holiday to be feasible. Interviewees have highlighted that there's a lack of these facilities, and how this is closely linked to the increased litter aside the roads and in the village.
One person explained that the accommodation sector goes in cycles and the Bed and Breakfast businesses adapted some years ago to reflect the requirements of the changing market for self catering. Now it seems shorter stays offered by the Bed and Breakfast model are coming back into demand but the industry needs time to adapt.

Litter-related issues in the cave
Visitors are sometimes not aware of the natural value of the site and might therefore have disrespectful behaviors. 3 out of 5 interviewees referred to this issue. One of them said he would go to the cave almost everyday to check if everything is fine and to collect any rubbish left by tourists. Another said that they regularly collect litter but it's becoming such a health hazard they do not plan to continue to do this.

Deterioration of the path and fences

Mainly due to the weather, the path guiding to the cave and fences inside of it are subject to regular maintenance. The path gets quite slippery if not properly maintained, and the drains need to be cleaned regularly. Especially in winter time the path can get washed away.
One of the interviewees is in charge of the risk assessment for Smoo Cave, providing visual reports with photographic records, followed by professional inspection provided by the Highland Council. According to the respondents, this cooperation seems to assure that the site is properly maintained or at least major issues are addressed in the short term. Although the maintenance work used to be done by some Highland Rangers and one respondent states that the Highland Council should take charge of it more regularly.

Future developments

All respondents have agreed that Smoo Cave does not need more efforts in terms of a promotion strategy. The site is already very popular and attracts thousands of visitors every year, more than what its capacity actually is. Despite the already discussed issues caused by visitor pressure, all interviewees strongly support Scotland public access regulation to sites such as Smoo Cave. In fact, none of them suggested that the number of visitors should be somehow limited, or that they should be charged to access the cave. One person suggested there might be scope to charge for car parking if a car park was community owned.

Improvements that should be made to the site highlighted in interviews include:

- Improving the paths and handrail fencing;
- Improving the lighting system in the cave;
- Extend the available parking;
- Make tourists park in the village, or the community hall, to ease the site's car park pressure;
- Monitoring the walkway in the cave;
- Leaflets, brochures or QR codes to give tourists the opportunity to know more about the cave;
- Billboards stressing the importance of having responsible behaviors (no wildfires, no litter, no parking aside the road, etc.)

Another interesting point was raised by one respondent who, when asked about a potential community land buyout of the site, mentioned that there has been an attempt going in this direction in the past, but it had failed. According to him, the reason behind this was that it was not going to be viable for the community because of the high maintenance costs the site has (e.g. to assure safety standards).

Following the work of this project, the Geopark managers were made aware that a privately owned pay and display car park with electric car charging points and a laundry kiosk will open for the 2021 season just opposite Smoo Cave.

Online survey report

Introduction

As part of the community consultation process, an online survey was also conducted. Residents of communities living near Smoo Cave were particularly targeted by sharing the survey on local community Facebook groups in Durness and neighboring Kinlochbervie.

Furthermore, both the intern, coordinator and Durness and Kinlochbervie community directors of the North West Highlands Geopark promoted it among their direct contacts.
The survey was anonymous and included mainly multiple answers and likert scale questions, and an open text one. The total number of collected responses was 50, of which 3 should be discounted as being from outwith the region.
The survey included the following questions:

1 - Do you value Smoo Cave as a place to visit yourself?
2 - Gender
3 - Age Group
4 - Where do you live?
5 - How important do you think it is to improve the paths and handrail fencing? (On a scale from 1 to 6)
6 - How important do you think it is to leave leaflets, brochures or create QR codes to give tourists the opportunity to know more about the cave? (On a scale from 1 to 6)
7 - How important do you think it is to have signs stressing the importance of having responsible behaviors (no wildfires, no litter, no parking aside the road, etc.)? (1 to 6)
8 - How annoyed are you by traffic issues and car park pressure at Smoo Cave?
9 - How annoyed are you by litter/waste left at the cave?
10 - To what extent would you like to have a Geotrail to engage visitors to the cave with its place in a UNESCO site? Please visit this website to find out about the Geotrail in Coigach: www.visitcoigach.com/see-and-do/the-coigach-geotrail (please copy and paste the link into your browser to visit)
11 - How would you like to see Smoo Cave in 10 years time? Please use this space to tell us any further ideas you have as well.

Analysis of results

The first question was asked to understand whether residents valued Smoo Cave as a place to visit themselves. 98% of respondents answered positively. This should be considered as an important data reflecting residents' willingness to protect and effectively conserve the site.

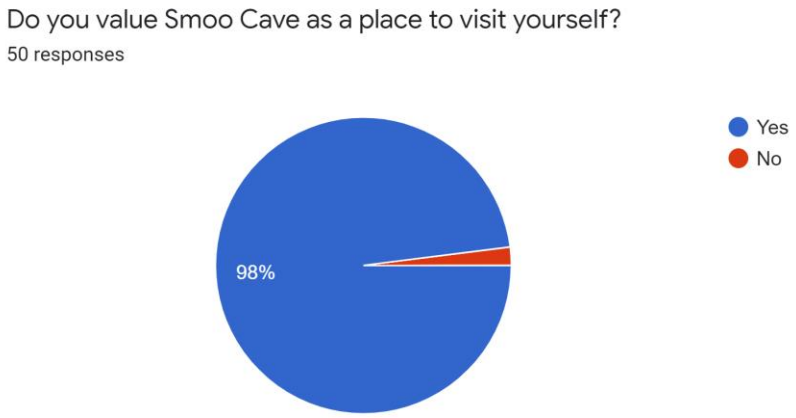

Figure 16 - Survey question 1.

The second,third and fourth questions aimed at identifying the most relevant demographic information of respondents. In terms of the gender, 54% of respondents were females, while the 44% were males. To check whether these data represent a good cross-section of the population responding to the survey, they were compared to census data contained in the Durness community plan, that reports that in 2011 males were 54% and females 46%. Therefore, it can be assumed that a prevalence of women answered this survey. Although it should be acknowledged that only 62% of respondents were Durness' residents and for this reason the census data should then be considered as an approximate indicator. The results show that the survey was mainly completed by people between 46 and 60 years old (38%) and people older than 60 years old (36%), followed by 16% of respondents aged between 31 and 45 and only an 8% of people of 18 to 30 years old.

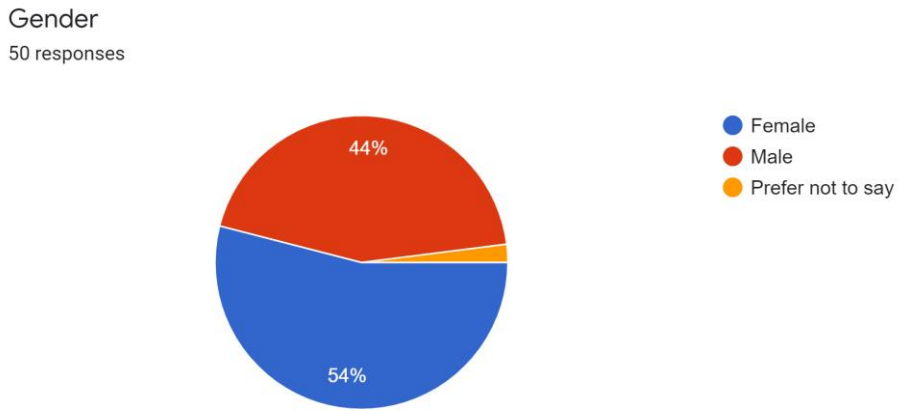

Figure 17 - Survey question 2

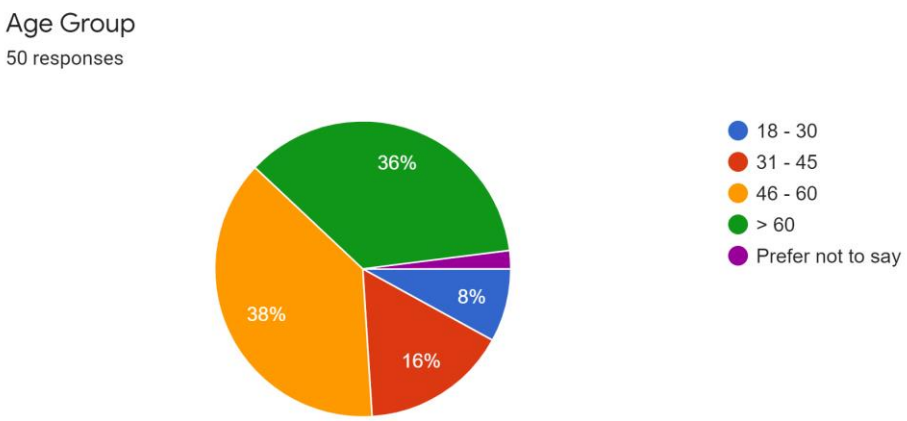

Figure 18 - Survey question 3

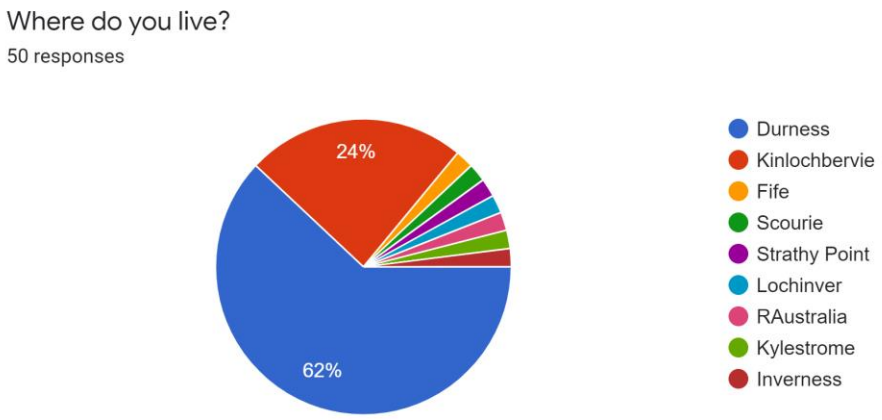

Figure 19 - Survey question 4

The following 5 questions aimed at identifying which issues residents think that are the priority ones to address at Smoo Cave. Question 5 focused on the paths and handrail fencing maintenance. 48% gives it a great value, while another 28% think it is a quite important aspect to protect the site.

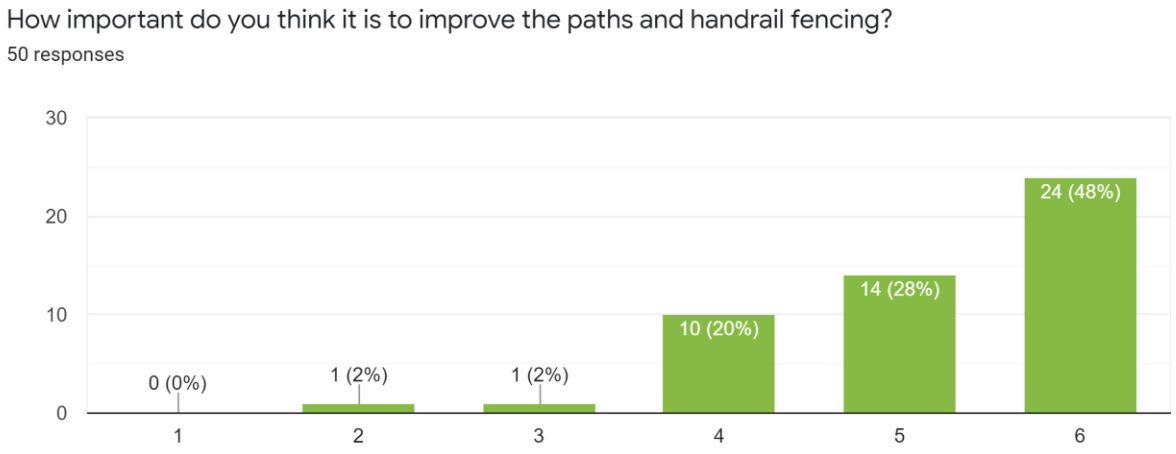

Figure 19 - Survey question 5

Question 6's aim was to understand whether residents think it would be appropriate to create and distribute educational material to give visitors the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the cave. Results show that 64% consider this a valid option, while a smaller percentage (26%) seems not to give it a high value. As for question 1, when respondents were asked whether they valued Smoo Cave as a place to visit themselves, also this answer shows that residents are interested in the site and in finding ways to better preserve and manage it.

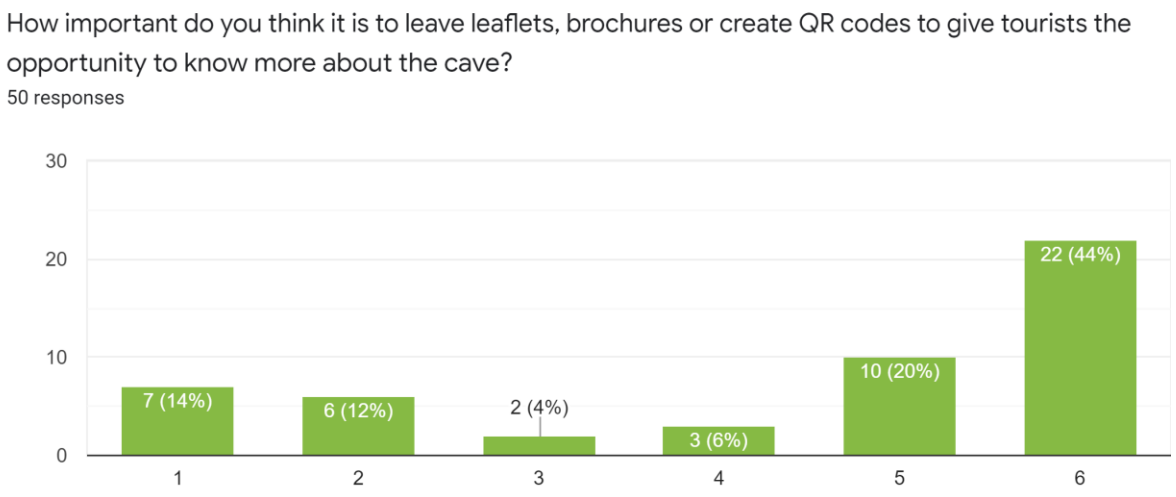

Figure 20 - Survey question 6

When asked how important signs stressing the importance of having responsible behaviors might be (question 7), the vast majority of respondents (86%) agreed this might be a useful option. This answer should be considered as an indicator of the relevance of impacts caused by high volumes of visitors to the area. Residents are aware of these impacts and are keen to find options to ease these pressures.

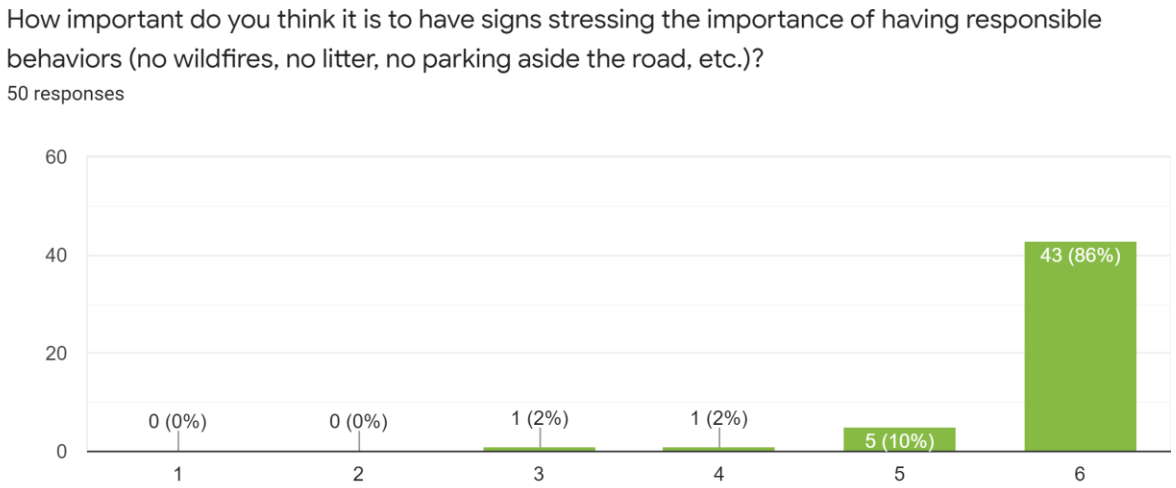

Figure 21 - Survey question 7

The answer to question 8 denotes that one of the most relevant issues impacting on the site and its surrounding is traffic and car park pressure. In fact, 70% of respondents answered that they are very annoyed by this, and only 4% are not annoyed at all. Those who indicated they are not annoyed at all (2 individuals) live in Kinlochbervie (1 individual) or Durness (1 individual).

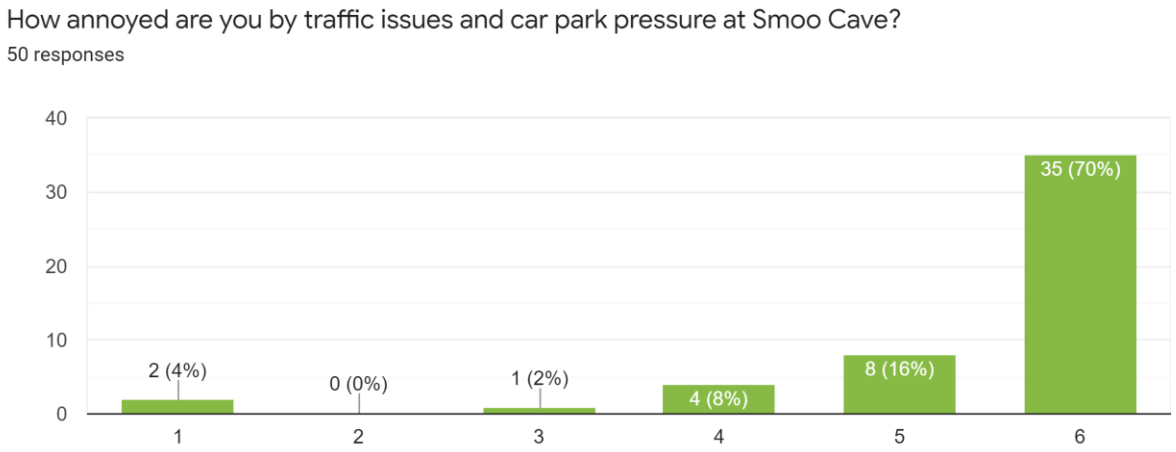

Figure 22 - Survey question 8

Another relevant impact caused by overcrowding is litter and waste left at the site. All respondents are aware of this issue and most of them are very annoyed by it.

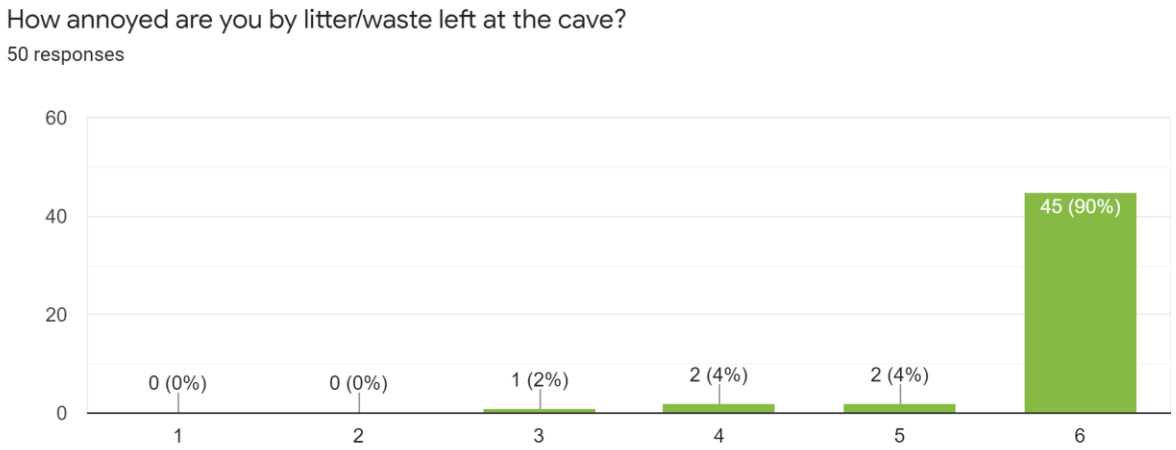

Figure 23 - Survey question 9

Question 10 aimed at investigating whether a potential option for Smoo Cave might be the development of a new Geotrail to engage visitors with its place in a UNESCO site. 42% of respondents would largely support this option, and another 36% also agree but to a smaller extent. Only 22% was neutral or uninterested.

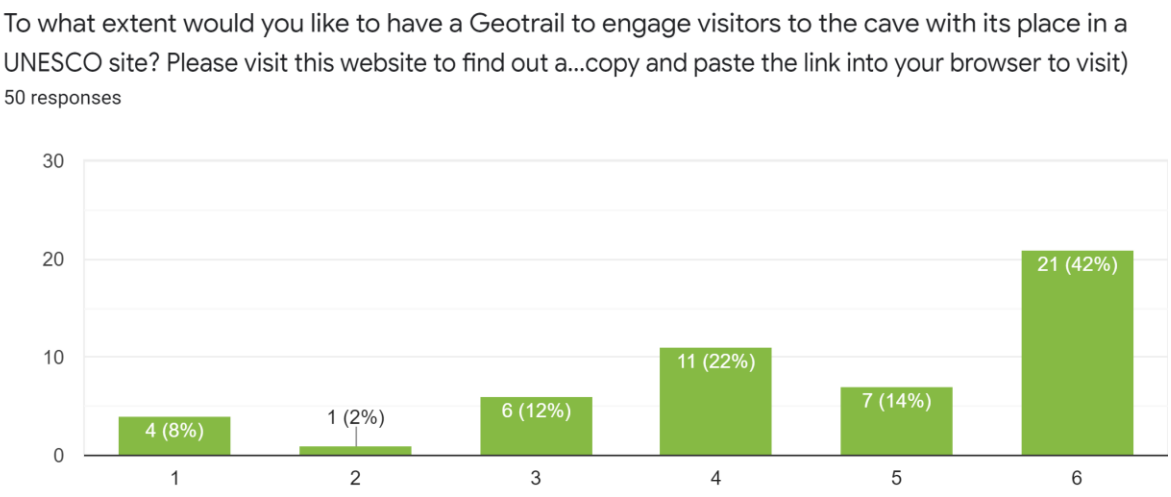

Figure 24 - Survey question 10

The final question's objective was to collect residents' views and aspirations for Smoo Cave. 35 out of 50 respondents answered this question. 23% of respondents to this question mentioned improved visitor engagement, this ranged from natural and cultural heritage interpretation, thorough education on responsible behaviour to continuing/increased tours, a visitor centre and the employment of a cave ranger (see figure 25). Many responses (19%) are concerned with preserving the cave's natural qualities, avoiding a 'theme park' approach and carrying out 'light touch' management . Better waste management is also an aspiration (11%) as well as improved vehicle management options (10%). 7% of respondents were concerned about safety issues and 4% would welcome path improvements. 2% favour more intensive management and 2% were concerned about lighting improvements and preventing visitors from building rock cairns (both were linked to ecological concerns).

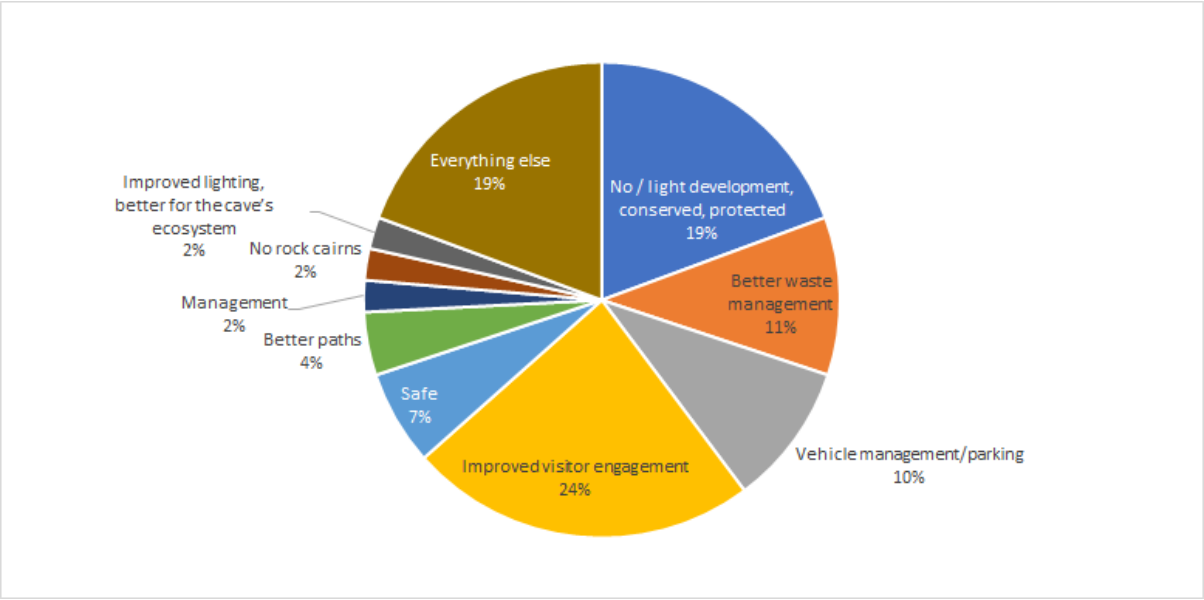

Figure 25 - Summary, question 11.

Other aspirations included a 30mph speed limit, more sensitive rockfall mitigation measures (the current nets were deemed visually displeasing), paths linking communities to the cave, road widening, outdoor activities like zip line and coasteering, better toilets and accessibility for disabled people.

Consultation summary and conclusions

The consultation process has allowed us to identify what the most relevant issues of Smoo Cave are. These are mainly impacts caused by high volumes of visitors, and include:

Issue	**Community Survey**	**Stakeholder Interviews**
Litter/Waste problems	98% concerned to some extent	Identified as an issue
Responsible behaviour education	98% in favour	Identified as an issue
Traffic congestion and limited car park capacity	90% annoyed to some extent Management options include speed limits, pathworks, more parking & road widening.	Make tourists park in the village, or the community hall, to ease the site's car park pressure. Extend the available parking.
Paths and Handrail fencing maintenance	96% in favour 7% cited safety as a concern	Improving the paths and handrail fencing an ongoing activity
Leaflets, brochures or QR codes to give tourists the opportunity to know more about the cave	70% in favour	Identified as an opportunity. Billboards etc for visitor information.
Monitoring the walkway in the cave	Not mentioned	Identified as an ongoing activity
Low-key management/ development	Identified as an aspiration	No specific changes proposed
Cave lightening system	4% identified an issue unpromoted	Improving the lighting system in the cave.

The consultation has helped us understand concerns and aspirations for Smoo Cave. Residents that were involved agreed that **no big changes should be made** at the site other than a more regular maintenance; in fact, they seem to fully appreciate the site and its natural value as it is now: wild and mainly untouched. Also, **the site should not be further promoted**, since it is already very popular among the Highlands and Scotland. Instead, promotion and **visitor engagement should focus on responsible behaviour**. One major issue that needs

to be addressed is the **improvement of parking facilities**. Although this might not imply a new car park, but the already present infrastructure in Durness, which is in a walking distance from the cave.

Finally, any actions aiming at enhancing the site's historic and geological value and therefore i**mproving visitors and residents experience will be appreciated**. Such actions might include informative leaflets through QR codes and a potential new North West Highlands Geopark trail.

Part Three: Visitor Management in the North West Highlands Geopark

Review

Local activities

Within the Geopark there are two community tourism organisations: Visit Coigach and Discover Assynt.

Visit Coigach covers the community council area of Coigach and is composed of approximately 40 members. A committee of six volunteers and one paid administrator run a website, print and distribute information leaflets, maintain visitor information signage, organise music events and produce publications including the Coigach Geotrail. Beyond these activities, the organisation does not actively participate in tourism planning or act as an industry advisor.

Discover Assynt is a community owned tourism organisation which operates under the charitable care of the Assynt Development Trust and is managed by the Local Development Officer. The organisation receives donations from between 50 - 80 members to help it maintain a website and social media channels, organise industry networking events, attend regional and national tourism events to represent the area. Additionally since the advent of the pandemic the organisation has shifted towards supporting and advising tourism businesses and services on matters relating to Coronavirus guidelines and regulations. Discover Assynt has been a useful conduit to supporting the local tourism sector with grant funding, and advocacy with national tourism agencies and government bodies. Discover Assynt plan to extend their current operation further north to areas where there is little in the way of community representation within the tourism sector, providing business networking, promotion, support and advocacy. They intend to rebrand as 'North by North West.'

At the end of 2020 a **tourism subgroup of the Kinlochbervie Locality Group** has been formed. The Locality Group is part of the Sutherland Community Partnership and is led by the Highland Council Ward Manager. The tourism subgroup is comprised of a handful of volunteers who are working on a new website and visitor information leaflet. The group will engage with the community and businesses to ensure representation as the website and leaflet are developed.

The **Wester Ross Tourism Partnership** covers the community of Coigach in the south of the Geopark; the partnership represents the shared interest of the communities of Wester Ross

in relation to sustainable tourism. As a collaborative group, it is tasked with considering all aspects of the destination in order to find common solutions to satisfy the host communities, local businesses and visitor needs.

Geopark activities

Visitors are attracted to the North West Highlands Geopark because of its natural beauty which is underpinned by its world-class geological heritage —the management body adds value for visitors through its role in telling the story of the landscape and enhancing the visitor experience through its events, activities and facilities. It helps to promote the area in a way that fosters responsible, respectful tourism. It provides events, activities, experiences and educational programmes that tell the stories of the landscape, so that visitors and local people can increase their knowledge, enjoyment, understanding and respect for the area, whilst supporting the local economy.

A stated aim of the Charity's propositions document is to align and facilitate and focus resources into the area to help to conserve and celebrate it and to promote community pride, cohesion and well-being. It aims to advocate for the area to agencies and authorities, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally—your support for that advocacy would be gratefully received.

The Geopark managers are currently delivering heritage projects that also perform visitor management functions including Geopods (information and landscape interpretation points), and heritage publications, and within the Coigach Assynt Living Landscape program; a walking guidebook for Coigach and Assynt, consultation on visitor communications, and a mobile phone application. Core activities include a small visitor center that provides interpretation and information provision for the Geopark area, an area information leaflet and a website.

The North West Highlands 2045 Vision steering group was formed in early 2020 to focus the collective voices in the Geopark area, extending east slightly, with a view to developing a Vision for the region to fit with the Scottish Government's carbon net zero goal. A document will be prepared for the incoming Scottish Government by June 2021. The Vision is concerned with sustainable development and recognises tourism as a major economic driver in the region but does not plan to provide a platform for visitor management actions specifically.

Regional activities

Highlands and Islands Enterprise consider Venture North to be the umbrella Destination Management Organisation for Sutherland and Caithness and have recently awarded them a three-year funding package to support their strategic objectives providing the extra capacity needed to develop and deliver a sustainable destination recovery plan. Their proposals are very much about collaboration and support for the tourism industry, as well as ensuring a stronger representative voice for the area. Their plans for the next year include recruiting a consultant and hosting several stakeholder workshops to identify the needs within Caithness and Sutherland. They plan to engage with the public sector and communities as well as industry.

The Sutherland Community Partnership has agreed to set up a Sustainable Tourism Subgroup. This will cover the whole Sutherland region and provide a forum for communities to raise concerns or share opportunities around tourism issues. The group does not intend to develop any management plans itself but does see the need for a platform for communities on the west coast (e.g. the region covered by the Geopark).

The Highland Council has begun to produce a Visitor Management Plan for the whole Highland Region. The plan outlines the high-level infrastructure and information provision objectives but does not yet have the level of detail on where projects will take place. A single project is identified as already underway in the Geopark area in 2021; the Lochinver motorhome waste disposal project, currently under development by the Assynt Development Trust. UNESCO is referenced in the Highland Council Draft Visitor Management Plan but the Geopark is not specified.

National activities

VisitScotland are currently developing a UNESCO National Trail that will highlight the Geopark and promote it through the lens of UNESCO, focusing on responsible tourism messaging. However, there have been difficulties in deciding what sites to promote since all sites within the Geopark frequently reach capacity during the summer months.

Tourism partnership online meeting report

Currently there is no clear mechanism in the North West Highlands for interested parties to develop solutions to address visitor impacts and improve local and visitor experiences and place. To begin to address this, the North West Highlands sustainable tourism event was organised with a clear objective: to bring together stakeholders in the North West Highlands to see if the Geopark could start a conversation on working together to find solutions to shared tourism issues for the benefit of the communities and their heritage. The meeting was held online on March 16th using the video conferencing platform Zoom. The event was promoted on social media and through the personal contacts of the Geopark management body directors and staff to attract local and regional stakeholders. The meeting's included an invited speaker from the Wester Ross Tourism Partnership, summary of the results of the Smoo Cave consultation and a discussion on opportunities and challenges for collaboration.

The total number of participants was 26. The stakeholders included were tourism businesses, hotel owners, community councils representatives (Coigach, Assynt, Scourie, Kinlochbervie and Durness), landowners (John Muir Trust, Assynt Foundation) and public sector representatives including NatureScot, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, The Highland Council and Visit Scotland. Venture North representatives were in attendance.

The Geopark's coordinator introduction, the case of Wester Ross Tourism Partnership and the presentation of Smoo Cave community consultation results served as a basis to start an open discussion on challenges and potential solutions to visitor management issues, and above all to test whether there is appetite to cooperate on a landscape scale across the North West Highlands, bringing communities, businesses, landowners, NGOs and public sector together to focus resources and efforts to foster responsible travel to the area.

The open debate raised the following issues:

- Visitors' irresponsible behaviors (e.g. wild camping, inexperienced campervans drivers)
- Absence of a common communication strategy among stakeholders to make sure tourists get the same messages
- Poor infrastructure maintenance/investment
- Lack of waste/chemicals disposals and public toilets
- High seasonality of tourism, with peak months exceeding the area's capacity)
- Lack of suitable public transport
- Pollution caused by high volumes of vehicles on the roads
- Police Scotland's under representation in the area
- Achmelvich beach is another visitor hotspot suffering damage

Beside highlighting issues and impacts caused by high volumes of visitors to the North West Highlands, potential solutions and constructive feedback was also shared during the meeting.

Concerning visitors' irresponsible behaviors, more than one participant stressed the importance of **'making it easy for tourists to behave responsibly'**. Suggestions were:

- Shared long term strategy
- Clear communication guidelines
- Informative material for pre-arrival planning for websites, social media
- A post-arrival leaflet including guidelines for responsible behaviour and information, for example, shops, chemical waste points, public toilets and shower locations. This would allow tourists to properly help the recovery of the industry and not risk causing more issues.

Participants also referred to the great potential that a common destination marketing campaign might have to reach tourism sustainability goals. This cooperation would also help to identify;

- Which areas/ sites to promote according to their capacity
- Encourage visitors to come at quieter times of the year
- Spread information on driving single-track roads, enlisting the help of motorhome hire companies.

Another solution discussed to ease visitor's pressure refers to the employment of more rangers, both from Nature Scot and High Life Highland, so they can invite tourists to act more responsibly and in respect with nature and residents' daily lives. It is in this regard that participants highlighted that rangers do not actually have power to enforce the law and that exactly for this reason more Police Scotland's officers are needed to ensure compliance with the rules.

In terms of long term sustainability goals, also referring to climate change impacts, the North West 2045 vision steering group was identified as common ground to share aspirations for the North West Highlands. According to participants, this group might provide the opportunity to create common goals for green recovery, e.g. zero carbon aims, but it is not the mechanism for short to medium term planning.

One of the objectives of this workshop event was to understand whether there was appetite for a more cooperative approach. Participants discussed and agreed that none of the issues

described above can be addressed without a strong cooperation between stakeholders. In this regard, statements on this included:

'Since visitors move around and do not stay in a single place, solutions need to be thought on a bigger scale, and that's why we all need to work together on that.'

'The bigger the voice, the bigger the chance that they might listen more.'

An in-meeting poll asked participants if, in principle, would you/your organisation wish to collaborate to focus resources and efforts to foster sustainable tourism? 89% of participants said they were in favour and the remainder were unsure.

The meeting was concluded by the Geopark's coordinator stressing the importance of this conversation among stakeholders to continue in order to find and implement efficient actions to ease visitors' pressures.

Follow up conversations

After the workshop event, the Geopark coordinator conducted follow up conversations with NatureScot, Venture North, Assynt Development Trust and the Sustainable Tourism Subgroup of the Sutherland Community Partnership to help develop the following conclusions and recommendations arising from this project.

Conclusions

Visitor numbers to the North West Highlands Geopark have continued to increase since 2010. In recent years visitor volumes in Durness, a geographical bottleneck within the Geopark, have begun to stress the capacity of the host community. The infrastructure at sites like Smoo Cave has become strained.

It is well understood that visitors are attracted to the North West Highlands primarily because of the natural heritage but there is no organisation planning strategically in the short to medium term (5 - 10 years) and focusing resources on actions that will protect the natural heritage as well as provide benefits for the local communities and visitor economy.

NatureScot has supported the work detailed in this report, and through the Better Places fund is demonstrating a commitment to ensuring heritage tourism is supported by coherent visitor management strategies and strong collaboration between stakeholders.

The Highland Council have demonstrated a willingness to work with the communities, in particular the Ward Manager for Sutherland and Councillor, Hugh Morrison. Venture North will be developing (a) destination plan(s), but it is not yet clear which areas they will focus on, either geographically or thematically.

Communities and organisations including the public sector would like to work together to coordinate solutions to challenging visitor behaviours and environmental impacts (natural and infrastructure related) however, currently there is no mechanism to facilitate this. Sensitive heritage promotion and conservation in the Geopark and by it's management body is appreciated and understood to be a valuable tool for visitor engagement.

Recommendations

1. Results of the Smoo Cave consultation should be made available to the Highland Council Infrastructure and Environment officer and the Durness Community. An application could be made to the NatureScot Better Places fund round 2 by May 14th to develop a light touch visitor management plan and interpretation materials following the NatureScot Management for People guidance document. Funding may be available from the Rural Tourism Infrastructure fund, round 4 to implement parking or path improvements. This should be led by the Highland Council and Durness Community but Geopark staff could support the work, particularly on developing interpretation and visitor information.
2. The North West Highlands Geopark should be considered by Destination Managers as a discrete destination within the Highlands and within Sutherland, because of its;
    a. unique and distinctive natural and cultural heritage,
    b. particular infrastructure issues,
    c. distinctive identity/culture, and;
    d. UNESCO designation and branding.
3. NWHG should coordinate a heritage and science tourism working group with local stakeholders, to develop a series of heritage tourism objectives for North West Highlands Geopark and facilitate communication between different stakeholders.
4. The Geopark management body (NWHG) should offer to participate in Destination Management or Planning work carried out by;
    a. Venture North
    b. North by North West
    c. The Sustainable Tourism Subgroup of the Sutherland Community Partnership
    d. Wester Ross Tourism Partnership

    particularly to contribute heritage based objectives to any action plans.
5. NWHG should input into the North West Highlands 2045 Vision group to ensure heritage tourism planning is included in the 2045 Vision.
6. Keep Venture North informed in VisitScotland's UNESCO National Trail development

Back to the top.

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