

Press Release

22nd September 2015

New Lewis observatory on track as patron appointed and two new partnerships announced

Thousands of visitors set to enjoy the island's rich marine wildlife and dark skies

An exciting new environmental project, which aims to develop a multi-purpose observatory at one of Scotland's most remote points, has taken another step forward thanks to two new partnerships.

Gallan Head Community Trust (GHCT), on the Isle of Lewis, has joined forces with the University of St Andrews and Stornoway Astronomical Society as part of its Cetus Project, which aims to attract visitors to observe and listen to the island's rich marine wildlife during the day and to enjoy its spectacular views of the Milky Way at night.

GHCT is in the final stages of a community buyout following a process administered by the Scottish Government, known as "Community Right to Buy".

Professor John Brown, Astronomer Royal for Scotland, will be Patron of the Cetus project.

Stornoway Astronomical Society will work with GHCT on the phased development of observatory facilities on the peninsula, with the aim of creating opportunities for interest, enjoyment and education, building on success towards the design and development of the observatory.

Meanwhile, Fife-based SA Instrumentation Ltd will provide assistance and equipment to monitor marine wildlife sounds and movements from the Gallan Head, across Loch Roag to Old Hill and Berisay. A spin-out company of the University of St Andrews, SA Instrumentation are pioneers in real time autonomous acoustic detection, using their Passive Acoustic Monitoring (PAM) process for marine mammal monitoring.

Martin Hayes, GHCT Chairman, said the Cetus project is part of the Trust's vision for sustainable improvement of the local economy, social and natural environment, as well as the creation of learning opportunities and enjoyment for all.

"Our aim is to establish a multi-purpose observatory where visitors can study and enjoy the dark skies, the marine wildlife of Loch Roag, and the remarkable natural and historical environment. The project is dependent upon successful completion of the community buyout of MOD Aird Uig, expected to conclude later this year."

The Gallan Head is a small peninsula in Uig at the most north-westerly tip of the UK, which has been hidden from the public for many decades. The area has no light pollution and, on a clear night, the Milky Way appears to the naked eye as an almost solid band across the sky.

Professor and Leverhume Emeritus Research Fellow (comet-star collisions physics) in The School of Physics and Astronomy in The University of Glasgow, Professor John Brown's solar research won him a Gold Medal (Geophysics) from the Royal Astronomical Society. The professor is renowned for his close involvement in diverse public and school astronomy and planetarium outreach projects which, together with his use of magic and other arts in science to inspire people, won him an Institute of Physics Award for Public Promotion of Physics. A keen amateur astronomer since the age of 10, Professor Brown said:

"The Cetus project is bold, imaginative, and exciting and I am very happy to support the Trust in their venture," he said. "I look forward to taking an active role in advising the Trust on the project."

Stornoway Astronomical Society President Donny Mackay described the Gallan Head as the 'perfect place' to locate an astronomical observatory.

"The peninsula is listed by the Royal Astronomical Society as an official dark skies area and there is a clear line of sight from all compass points. Our aspiration is for a large planetarium in a main observatory building, an attraction for visitors at any time of day, whatever the weather."

By day, there are stunning views of the west coast of Lewis, over Loch Roag to the islands of Bernera, Old Hill, Berisay and Pabbay, across the Uig hills down to Harris and over the sea to the Flannan Isles and, on a clear day, St Kilda.

The seas around the peninsula are rich in marine wildlife; whale sightings include Orca, Minke and Pilots and Basking sharks, dolphins, porpoises, seals and even the occasional sunfish can also be seen. Large flocks of seabirds hunt shoals of fish in Loch Roag.

Angus Aitken, Senior Systems Engineer, SA Instrumentation, said: "This is a very exciting project and the first to study marine wildlife in this part of Scotland.

"We see the opportunity to establish something very special that will provide enjoyment and interest for many people, and we are very pleased to be associated with the Cetus Project. We are very much looking forward to planning early trials."

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For more information, please contact Martin Hayes at mphayes@hotmail.co.uk

Notes to Editors:

Gallan Head Community Trust was established a year ago by the small and very remote community of Aird Uig on the Isle of Lewis. The purposes of the Trust are:

- To manage community land and associated assets for the benefit of the Community and the public in general.
- To provide, or assist in providing, recreational facilities, and/or organising recreational activities, which will be available to members of the Community and public at large with the object of improving the conditions of life of the Community.
- To advance community development, including regeneration within the Community.
- To advance the education of the Community about its environment, culture, heritage and history.
- To advance environmental protection or improvement including preservation, sustainable development and conservation of the natural environment, the maintenance, improvement or provision of environmental amenities for the Community and/or the preservation of buildings or sites of architectural, historic or other importance to the Community.