INTERPRETACTION

Interpretive Plan

Merkinch Local Nature Reserve

March 2009

'Deep Mud Drain' in 'Witches Coffin Pool'
With 'Sailors Grave Bay' beyond

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Executive Summary

This interpretive plan is intended as a how-to guide. It lays the path for the development of interpretation for Merkinch Local Nature Reserve [LNR] over the next five years. It should be revised annually to keep it relevant: all plans are (and should be) fine-tuned and adapted during implementation.

The plan has an unusually strong focus on people, as without the interest, support and participation of as broad a cross-section of the local community as possible, the recommendations within this plan will be much harder to accomplish.

It makes the key recommendation that a ranger/warden be appointed as quickly as possible, ideally from within the local community, so that the 'place' can quickly gain a 'face' whom local people will get to know and trust.

It also recommends that on-site interpretation is directly connected to local people through photographs, reminiscences and direct involvement.

There is unusually slow implementation recommended for on-site structures, with most of the more ambitious structures not being installed until Year 3 onwards. This approach reflects the need to 'grow' the local community in interest in and support for Merkinch LNR. This is counterbalanced by an exceptionally long list of off-site interpretive techniques and structures, notably a community-focused website. This reserve needs to be rooted within Inverness and the Highlands as a whole as well as Merkinch itself and off-site interpretation is a good way of achieving this.

The plan is also unusual in going further down the line of specific suggestions for implementation than is normal with an interpretive plan. This is due to the extensive community consultation undertaken for the planning process, and the need to apply immediately some findings from the community consultation (e.g. placenames within the reserve) for the plan to be have real meaning. It may also avoid the necessity of a further implementation planning process which would be time-consuming and costly to the LNR management team, so that their focus can instead switch to the business planning for the new LNR centre, a crucial part of the LNR's future.

The recommendation of a specific focus on herons within the reserve will we hope provide a 'unique selling point' for the centre beyond its immediate community and will help to tie the new building strongly to its natural environment.

The plan does include some costings for implementation of its recommendations, but it should be noted that these are rough guideline estimates only and that it will be beneficial to seek further quotations, notably from local suppliers, as particular tasks arise. The total estimated costs over five years for on and off-site interpretation, events budgets and related marketing etc would be in the region of £75,000, including an estimate of £23,000 for the heronry observation element of the project and £7,300 for a teenage shelter in the Back Field area. This excludes staff costs which have been estimated at £20,000 per year pro rata. With a clear interpretive vision as a foundation for fundraising and partnership budgeting, these are achievable figures.

It has been a privilege to work with the management team and with local people in putting together this plan and I would like to thank them for their vision and support.

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1.   Background

Lichen in old hedgerow, Midgy Lane

This plan should be read in conjunction with the management plan and biodiversity action plans written for the Merkinch Local Nature Reserve (LNR) team in March 2008 and January 2009 respectively.

While the title 'Merkinch' is applied by local people to the area to the south of the railway line, while the area to its north where the reserve is located is known as 'The Ferry': there is a clear differentiation between the two in the minds of local people (i.e. the reserve name itself could have been 'The Ferry Nature Reserve').   For the purposes of this plan however the name Merkinch covers both sides of the railway line divide.

In terms of interpretive planning, Merkinch LNR is a space used by many different audiences for many different activities, most desirable, some less so, and this is well documented within the management plan.

Interpretive planning at many more isolated nature reserves can be considered purely in terms of interpreting wildlife and nature, with an audience visiting the site often solely to enjoy these features. But Merkinch LNR is bounded by the heavily used 'Back Field/West Fields' area which is the only large area of open space which the people of Merkinch have to use for activities not normally associated with a nature reserve, such as playing football - or just 'chilling'.

This plan agrees with and complements many of the views on interpretation within the management plan. Where it differs, this is usually due to greater depth of community consultation, an acknowledged weakness in the management plan due to its required timescale, and reasons are clearly given.

1.1 What is interpretation?

As far as this project is concerned, interpretation is defined as **the three-way process of communication between:**

- **The natural world of Merkinch Local Nature Reserve, past, present and future**

- **All the people who have used it in the past, use it now or who could use it**

- **The team which cares for it today**

It is vital **not** to think of interpretation purely in terms of 'stuff on the ground': this is only part of the picture, and much of it is some way down the line in terms of planning at Merkinch.

1.2 Interpretation in Merkinch, past and present

1.2.1 People

Without carefully planned engagement of the local community – whether simply as reserve users or as more active supporters – the reserve will continue to feel slightly remote from its doorstep audience.

At present, misconceptions are rife – many parents feel that 'now it's a reserve, the kids shouldn't be playing out there.' Many people still also believe it to be unsafe in terms of the risk of aggression. Some comment that the paths are muddy and overgrown - although this has now been put right.

This process of engagement and re-engagement is as much part of the interpretive planning process as are orientation panels, for example.

1.2.1. The management team for Merkinch LNR

This draws together a broad group of organisations and individuals, both local and non-local, including:

- Merkinch Partnership

- Merkinch Greenspace

- Highland Council Rangers

- Highland Council Biodiversity Officer

- BTCV

- British Waterways

- Inverness Culloden Rotary Club

- Scottish Natural Heritage

There is currently no one individual whose main or sole responsibility is the day-to-day running of the reserve: the 'place' has at present no 'face' locally and this is limiting.

1.2.2. Social profile

It is very unusual for an area with the social profile of Merkinch to have a well-documented recent past in terms of interpretation. But a small group of local residents, led by Dell McLurg, working voluntarily, have for the past 20+ years made considerable efforts to instil pride in the natural environment in and around Merkinch within the local population – and have became effectively the 'faces of the place'.

Their efforts led to the creation of a small interpretive centre using very basic but effective techniques in the former Ferry ticket office, which could offer people a selection of local photographs, information and a place to talk, have a cuppa and use the loo. Although homespun, this small space was a place where local residents could feel a sense of connection to the natural world around them, largely through the generational photographs on display ('Look! There's Granda with the salmon he caught in the Ness!').

The ticket office is outwith the reserve project and has now been emptied for refurbishment. As is the way with many projects of this nature, the transition from purely voluntary activity to professional management is not without issues. These can however be resolved with patience and determination.

The creation of the nature reserve builds on the achievements of these volunteers, and its future success will depend on attracting similar local voluntary support within different user groups.

The archive which this small voluntary team has assembled, currently stored in boxes in several different locations and uncatalogued, will be of great value to the LNR and to the local community . It consists largely of photographs of local people using the LNR area in different ways through time. Many Merkinch families have been resident for generations and photographs of their interaction with the LNR area prior to designation will encourage future positive use and connection too.

These images, especially if digitised, would provide useful material for future interpretation online, in interpretive panels or leaflets, or for community drama.   Highland Archives are already interested in assisting in this cataloguing process, which could be carried out as an independently funded and managed project.

1.2.3   Placenames within the reserve

One major handicap to the reserve at present is the lack of consistency in names for precise areas within it. 'Kingfisher lagoon' used within the biological survey is unlikely to catch on locally as few people could readily identify a kingfisher - and specialist terminology like the word 'lagoon' should be avoided in interpretive use here!

Consultation with the local community during the course of the planning has suggested the following actual and suggested names (see sketch map in Appendix A):

- Ferry Pier (new name based on common usage: old ferry jetty and ticket office area, main access point to the reserve)

- Back Field (old name: narrow open area into reserve immediately to west of Ferry Pier and south of woodland – runs as far as Snakey Path)

- The Snakey (new path name suggested by local teenagers from High School: main informal unsurfaced rough path which connects Back Field to Sea Wall Path)

- Sledge Hill (new name suggested by local primary school children: small green mound within the Back Field)

- West Fields (old name: broader open area beyond The Snakey heading south west, includes the basketball court and football pitch – NB usage of 'The Westfield' as given in the management plan seems to be uncommon)

- The Carse (existing ancient overall name for whole open space Back Field/West Fields area including the areas beyond the reserve boundary, some now built on)

- Willie-the-Carse Walk (a new name suggested for the new path which leads from Carnarc Crescent across to the Silver Pool boardwalk – Willie-the-Carse was the farmer who sold the land on which many of The Ferry's houses are built, something of a local bogeyman figure due to a wartime facial disfigurement)

- Sea Wall Path (a new name suggested for path which runs along the sea wall between Ferry Pier and the railway line)

- Midgy Lane (existing name for path which runs from the railway line to Canal End)

- Swamp Wood East and Swamp Wood West (The Swamp is an existing recent name used by primary school children - areas of woodland on either side of Willie-the-Carse Walk which floods at high tide)

- Secret Wood (new name suggested by primary school children for densest area of woodland between Swamp Wood and The Snakey where deer breed)

- Wee Wood (new name suggested by primary school children for the smaller triangular area of woodland which links to Sledge Hill and the Back Field, beginning to the East of the Snakey)

- Silver Pool (old name: first pool you come to along the Sea Wall Path - the boardwalk connects here)

- Heron Pool (new name: second pool you come to beyond the railway line on left, where most herons are – makes more sense to major on the frequently sighted and dramatic local herons than the less apparent and very rare kingfisher)

- Witches Coffin Pool (old name: third pool you come to beyond railway line on your right)

- The Marshes (old name: existing collective name for all three pools)

- Sailors' Grave Bay (old name: tidal bay formed by canal edge and Beauly Firth, sweeping round to the Pier Point. May allude to 1894 tragedy when three ferrymen and three coastguards drowned)

- Monkey-Puzzle Corner (new name suggested for new picnic/seating area above the corner of Witches Coffin Pool close to where a large monkey puzzle tree with a rope swing on it used to grow)

- Canal End (new name: entry point at Caledonian Canal end)

- Deep Mud Drain (new name for an old problem area, dangerous deepwater drain which runs from Witches Coffin Pool to Heron Pool – see below)

It should be noted in particular that the scary names such as Witches Coffin and Sailor's Grave may have roots in actual features or events – but they have been used for years as a deterrent for local youngsters who might otherwise get into difficulties in the deep mud and are worth retaining for the same purpose.

It is also be worth calling the drainage channel between Witches Coffin Pool and Heron Pool 'Deep Mud Drain' on the map – it's also spooky and off-putting and should serve the same cautionary purpose, without specifically saying 'this drain is dangerous' on site which might prompt curiosity and exploration.

Other paths do exist within the reserve but they tend to be less defined than those listed. The route of those at the Ferry Pier/Sledge Hill end in particular may need to be affected when the new centre is in place and so it is inadvisable to name any others at present.

1.2.4   Existing structures on site

There are currently two stone monolith markers, designed to tie in with the 'Great Glen Ways Initiative' design profile. Each has 'Merkinch Local Nature Reserve' routed into the stone. One is placed at the turning circle, one at the canal. They have an empty space for a permanent or semi-permanent panel which has had various temporary notices affixed there. The stone monoliths themselves have not been damaged although temporary notices have been removed.

The stone monolith at the turning circle could have been better placed. At present it projects in front of a spectacular view looking north-west up the Beauly Firth towards Beinn Bha'ach Ard (862m), away from the reserve. Several regular users commented that they feel its current location somewhat spoils that view. It may have been located there for logical reasons, replacing another structure.

It could be better located with a clear view of the main reserve area itself framing it behind, i.e. to the left of where it is now and at a 45 degree angle to its current orientation.

Apart from the two markers, there is no existing interpretation on site other than the dolphin murals on the old ticket office walls which make the area look more friendly and welcoming, and a cluster of recent and very attractive chainsaw-carved benches and other decorative wooden features on the bank to the east of Ferry Pier.

Other than these benches, there is no seating on site anywhere other than the turning circle entry point, where two picnic tables of differing age and design and three other benches have been placed to look out to sea (a fourth is due to be installed in March 2009). There is also the stone/mortar base (for a former panel?) and several other currently unidentified structures.

There is some 'pathsinverness' signage at the entry points to the reserve indicating distances to places the other side of the reserve. Some has been vandalised and requires upgrading, ideally using new names from the reserve map.

1.3   The sense of place: a brief description of Merkinch LNR as it is now

1.3.1   by day

As dawn breaks, there is little evidence of human presence in the reserve. Occasionally on warmer summer nights one or two figures may emerge from the woodland having slept off the excesses of the night before under a tree, but this, it is generally agreed, is a rarity, not the rule!

In the very early morning, the resident deer population can be seen grazing on the short, sweet grass of the West Fields. The sun climbs and skylarks sing overhead, their calls mixing with those of the curlew and oystercatcher on the muddy shore.   The sun sparkles on the freshly broken bottle glass near the basketball pitch and catches the top of a heavy radiator which has been dumped into the Silver Pool during the night, doubtless with a satisfying splash, next to a couple of bikes which have been there some time. All are unsightly for humans but the wildlife is oblivious and mallard and tufted duck bob happily about the submerged radiator.

The deer take cover as the first dog-walkers of the day appear: usually male, often walking fierce-looking (but usually friendly) bull terriers or alsatian-type breeds.   Occasionally dogs are let loose without an owner in close proximity but again, this is the exception rather than the rule.

In the late morning a few mums and children may come and have a snack or picnic at the Ferry turning circle. The picnic tables are very exposed – some shelter would be welcome. Not many come very far into the reserve as yet, tending to stick to the edge, Ferry Pier or (if coming down from Muirtown/Clachnaharry) the Canal End, looking away from the reserve out to sea, across the firth and up at the mountains beyond, trying to spot dolphins or seals. Fathers walking babies in pushchairs or prams seem more ready to go right into the reserve, perhaps because of dog-walking experience.

According to the tides, herons and other smaller waders assemble to hunt for food in the tidal pools, but few human visitors stop to look or even notice them, which may safeguard them against human interference.

Lunchtime sees a smaller influx of dog-walkers and picnickers. The shortest dog-walking circuit appears to be out along the sea wall, down the first main path crossing the woodland, and back through the fields to the car park.   Next comes the board walk loop, and some dog-walkers go right to the canal and back along the straight Sea Wall/Midgy Lane paths, connecting at and crossing the railway line.

Few disabled users in wheelchairs, even motorised ones, or less able adults go into the reserve beyond the main access points at the canal end and Pier Point. The previous poor condition of the paths, lack of benches and difficulty in manoeuvring (notably over the railway junction) may put them off.

In the early evening the dog-walkers return, and a small group of youngsters on motorbikes tears up the path and disappears.   A flock of oystercatchers, disturbed by the racket, takes off, but soon settles again.

1.3.2 by night

Most dog-walkers make sure they are back at the periphery of the reserve before sunset. The woodland has a reputation as a scary place at night-time which probably far exceeds the facts.

On warmer nights, as it gets darker, groups of teenagers may assemble to hang out and drink in one small area near the basketball ground. There is no shelter, nowhere to sit.   The hard surface of the basketball court is at least dry underfoot.   As some youngsters get drunker, bottles get smashed and the broken glass covers the ground. Occasionally, some pass out from drink - but at least the area is overlooked by houses and help can be sought quickly and that is seen as a positive thing by many parents.

Smaller groups may occasionally use the woodland as a cover for drugs-related activity, but according to local teenagers this is a rarity rather than the rule. Occasionally, stolen goods may be also be stashed in the woodland or retrieved from there by the police.   None of these make the woodland any worse, or better, than the bulk of Forestry Commission Scotland's designated 'WIAT' woodlands (woodlands in and around town), for example.

None of these human activities have any impact on the wildlife of the reserve, which continues a parallel nocturnal existence. Owls hunt across the fields. A fox trots down the Snakey and disappears. Rabbits graze on 'Sledge Hill', oblivious to the danger nearby. Mice dine on hazelnuts. An otter slips unnoticed into the bladder-wrack of the shoreline. The tide rises and falls, flooding 'Swamp Wood', then draining away again.

The only nocturnal activity which has any lasting physical impact on the reserve's daytime profile is the breaking of bottles - and any vandalism which requires repair.

1.4   Interpretive planning connection to management and biodiversity planning

The existing management plan for Merkinch LNR is a good one but the amount of community consultation undertaken for this interpretive plan moves some of its thinking forward, especially in terms of themes (see 4.4), some interpretive resources and structures (see 8.) and in the use of a website as an essential interpretive tool (see 8.5).

Notably, the installation of any interpretive on-site structures such as waymarking, orientation panels, interpretive panels, sculptures or artwork must not be considered before considerable community interpretive development has taken place. The people must come first - then the stuff!

For example, designs for structures could be based on work by the local primary school; installation works could be carried out by local Rural Skills students from Inverness High School. Orientation panels should feature pictures of key local people – those of influence within the community, long-standing residents who are respected among their peers and their children - and be written as advice from them to the reader rather than in neutral 'officialese' as is usually the case. The key word is 'our': our reserve, our birds, our plants. 'Have you seen **our** herons down at Heron Pool?' 'Have you tried out **our** the new path along **our** shore?', etc.

1.5 Aims and objectives of this interpretive plan (as in original brief)

• To enhance the visitor experience by revealing the unique qualities of the site (see sections 3 and 4)

• To influence visitor behaviour and help meet the overall management objectives (see section 5)

• To help enhance and maintain the quality of the environment (see sections 7 and 8)

• To encourage visitors to discover more of the Reserve and explore the site as a whole (see section 1 and section 6)

• To encourage an increase in visitors to the site (see section 3)

• To fit with the site's 'sense of place' (see this section and throughout)

• To maximise synergies between this plan and the two other site management plans (see this section and throughout)

2.   **Methodology**

The 'Witches Coffin' – in fact part of the old 'Puggy Line' railway

2.1   Consultation techniques

Groups and individuals consulted with during the course of planning over the course of two/three months, January/February/March 2009:

- Members of the Merkinch LNR management team (both on site and direct)

- Merkinch Primary School (two assembly presentations and memory sheet competition, see Appendix B)

- Inverness High School (via Louise Hoult, Rural Skills classes - mainly local 14/15 year olds: on site discussion and other communication)

- Dell McLurg, and some of her NCH- supported children (discussion of previous interpretive activity on site and of children's usage)

- Community Police Officers (security issues on site, notably vandalism and suggested location of structures)

- Aonach Mhor team (Community Mental Health: usage by people with mental health problems)

- Merkinch Mums & Toddlers group (usage by parents and pre-school children)

- Merkinch friendship/lunch club (usage by older residents: memories)

- Highland Council Travellers Officer (past links between Merkinch and travelling community)

- Cath McNeil (local resident and parent)

- Brian Kane (local resident and motorised wheelchair user)

- Assorted anonymous local users of all ages, both on site and on the streets

- Telephone feedback from article featured in 'News & Views' (see Appendix D)

3.   **Unique people**

Dad and babe on Willie-the-Carse Walk

3.1   Living in Merkinch

'It's the reputation that's bad – not us'
Local resident

Merkinch is an area of Inverness which is unlikely to be visited by chance. Its housing estates are still predominantly grey and grim but Merkinch is surrounded by natural beauty: the River Ness on one side, the Beauly Firth and the new LNR and canal to the other. Once an island, it feels insular still. The Merkinch population is divided into two main groups: transient people who are forced to live there by circumstance, and who may have a very negative image of the place where they are obliged to live for whatever reason - and also a strong core of long-established families who live there by choice and are proud of Merkinch.

On the whole this is an area with challenges, but many of its inhabitants are resourceful and caring. Those who know about the area's past history and natural heritage are proud of it – but many, especially newcomers, do not - and this affects their integration and attitudes. Good interpretation of the reserve can make a difference to this issue.

3.2   Current users and uses

3.2.1   The seven ages of current LNR usage:

- Very young children are brought here in prams and pushchairs, and tend to be taken deeper into the reserve by their dad than by their mum

- Toddlers are brought here by mums or grandparents and may picnic at Pier Point, but concerns about hygiene and security may limit further use

- Children aged 5 – 8 may come here for an adult-led activity with parents or grandparents to play football or kick a ball about: at this age they are told some ritualised scary stories about the pools (Witches Coffin; Sailor's Grave; Deep Mud Drain etc) to discourage exploration. This has been an effective deterrent now for generations and needs to be sustained through formal confirmation of the placenames.

- Children aged 10 – 13 may come here independently. A spooky experience in the woodland at Hallowe'en seems to be something of a 'rite of passage'. Dens are built and greater familiarity is built with the woodland and paths than at any other time of their life. Many have come with the school and there is a high level of recollection of the LNR opening event within this age group (especially the lost hawk!) – see the Merkinch Memory forms held by Anne Sutherland [sample in Appendix B].

- Teenagers aged 14 or so split into three groups: those who continue to use the space positively, joining the local sea cadets or playing football on the pitch (mainly male); those who opt for anti-social activity, hanging out there and drinking, doing drugs or using motorbikes on site; and those for whom going to the reserve is simply as uncool as any other cultural/outdoor pursuit for this age group.

- Adults will sometimes return to the reserve with their own children, or to walk the dog, or to run or cycle: this will depend on their experiences earlier in life. Most of the dog-walkers spoken to had grown up in or near Merkinch and had positive childhood memories of the area.

- Older people and those with limited ability will only go as far into the reserve as they know they can comfortably walk and return: the lack of seating is a huge limiting factor with this audience, much more so about any concern over personal safety. Disabled users in wheelchairs and motorised wheelchairs cannot currently easily cross the railway line or manoeuvre through all of the Carnarc Crescent metal barriers designed to prevent vehicular access.

3.2.2   Main usage groups currently consist of:

Dog-walkers

- Issues of dog control and dog-fouling

Parents and very young children (in prams/pushchairs)

- Issues of security, hygiene and waymarking limit usage

Parents with older children (primary school)

- Fathers tend to bring their kids to play a specific game or for a specific activity: kicking a ball, playing golf, riding a bike – nature-spotting is incidental rather than a primary reason to come. Often seen as a place to bring boys rather than girls. Issues include hygiene (dog-fouling) and safety (broken glass)

Teenagers

- Tends to be the age when a minority of local teenagers engage in anti-social uses of the site: drinking, some drug use, breaking glass, vandalism, litter-dumping . Female teenagers will seldom come into the reserve as they see it as uncool. Issues include teenage safety, health and hygiene, lack of shelter, public and peer group perceptions

Older residents

- Often come to Ferry Pier to look out at the sea, but far fewer walk on into the reserve. For most, previous experience of lack of benches and uneven paths are a greater issue than any concern over personal security

Local drivers

- The turning circle at Ferry Pier is a popular place for local people to drive to in their lunch hour or between meetings just to enjoy the view, but very few park and walk any distance into the reserve. Issues include the likely lack of parking spaces as the reserve's popularity increases which will need addressing prior to the construction of the new reserve centre

Local motor/quad bike drivers

- Motorised biking is illegal on the reserve but the quad/motorbikers judge their timings carefully to minimise the likelihood of interception. Issues include the lack of other legal locations for this activity, the risk of harm to walkers/children/pets, the disturbance of local residents, reserve users and wildlife, the lack of electronic surveillance on site

3.3 Potential users and uses

3.3.1. Local women and girls

This audience needs more encouragement to use the reserve, for example:

- Attractive images of the reserve in unusual places locally: high on gable ends of houses, dingy corners, outside local shops and schools, in and on the local buses

- Regular led group activities: pushchair rambles, teddy-bear or Barbie/bratz doll picnics, earthwalks-type activities led by rangers

- Training key members of the local Mums & Toddlers group in skills needed to lead activities themselves

- Arts-based activities might appeal to some local female teenagers: outdoor drama, local band performance etc

- Better waymarking and completion of pathworks

- User-friendly interpretation, notably a portable map

- A place to shelter, have a cuppa and a blether and use the loo

3.3.2. Local people with mental and physical health issues

Walking round, or working in the reserve is good for both mental and physical health. This needs to be heavily promoted locally, slowly building confidence and a sense of ownership:

- Regular led group activities and possibly work parties on site

- Led familiarisation visits for local medical practice management teams as part of their Protecting Learning Time schedule

- Training of Aonach Mhor staff in what the reserve can offer

- Healthways-type regular walks

- Somewhere to shelter, have a cuppa and a blether and use the loo

3.3.3. Local older residents

Many people in this group have a great familiarity with the reserve area from childhood but their current use of it is frustratingly limited by access and mobility issues. This group appreciates:

- Well-surfaced, level paths

- Safety in numbers

- Plenty of seating

- Good information about new developments

- Somewhere to shelter, have a cuppa and a blether and use the loo

3.4 Local schools

The key two schools with which to build links through interpretation are:

- Merkinch Primary School

- Inverness High School

Once these are firmly established, further links can be developed with

- Bishop Eden Primary School

- Muirtown Primary school

Since the implementation of the 'Curriculum for Excellence', schools can link activities relating to and visits to the reserve in a cross-curricular way. To help them achieve this, the following will help:

- One main point of contact: a 'face' for the reserve, someone ideally local, with whom they can build a lasting relationship

- Site-specific resources developed for and by the schools available online

- Involvement in the development of interpretive structures/artworks/activities on site

- Engagement in on-site maintenance and development work (for older students)

3.5   Targeting people from further afield

3.5.1.   Other Inverness residents and visitors

At present the reserve is not widely used by the community beyond Merkinch. Some may be put off by the area's reputation, others simply do not realise what the reserve has to offer. To bring this group in, it will be necessary to:

- Provide attractive images of the reserve in unexpected places: council offices, Inverness Town Centre, local shopping centres, in local tourist and other publications

- Have a campaign of reserve images in and on local bus service

- Encourage other green transport links in and out of the reserve (e.g. led walks from town centre, or bike circuits)

- Encourage ex-pat links through a Merkinch LNR website

4. **Themes and topics to lead interpretation at Merkinch LNR**

Oystercatchers speckling Ferry Pier shore

4.1 General principles

A **theme** is a statement about Merkinch LNR which sums up what you want to achieve through all forms of interpretation which relate to it. **Sub-themes** are statements which explore the over-arching main theme in more detail. **Topics are** smaller categories within that sub-theme.

The key messages given in the management plan have been reworked into more specific themes for Merkinch in conjunction with local people during the consultation process. Here are some reactions to the original suggested 'key messages', which were established before full community consultation was possible.

''The natural heart of Merkinch''

- 'it's not at the centre of the place, if anything it's a sort of green bit on the edge'

- 'it doesnae set my heart pounding!'

- 'Grant Street is the heart of Merkinch'

"A great place to walk, relax and enjoy the coastal and mountain views"

- 'Well I wouldn't walk up there, especially alone'

- 'OK but it could be anywhere on the shore around here or in the Highlands.'

- 'What about the views of the pools?'

"A place for nature, shaped by people"

- 'A place for people – people should always come first. It's just a bit of wilderness.'

- 'I don't see what that means, shaped by people.'

4.2 Revised interpretive themes

MAIN THEME
The wildlife, plantlife and open spaces of our Local Nature Reserve can change the way everyone sees life in Merkinch

SUB-THEME A
Our Merkinch LNR has a past and a present to be proud of - and an exciting future

SUB-THEME B
Our Merkinch LNR has always been a place of comings and goings - both natural and human

SUB-THEME C
Our Merkinch LNR is so much more than just a nature reserve

Animals, plants and insects

Local community involvement

Tides, firth and Ferry

Past, present, future usage

Local memories of the area

4.2.1 MAIN THEME:

The wildlife, plantlife and open spaces of our Local Nature Reserve can change the way everyone sees life in Merkinch

4.2.2 SUB-THEME A

Our Merkinch LNR has a past and a present to be proud of - and an exciting future

Topics:

How did different people use the reserve in the past?

How can we use the reserve positively today?

What might the reserve be like a few years from now?

4.2.3   SUB-THEME B

Our Merkinch LNR has always been a place of comings and goings - both natural and human

Topics:

What species of animal, insect and plantlife can we find here at different times of year?

How does the tide affect the habitat of the reserve?

What was the role of the Firth and Ferry in the comings and goings here?

4.2.4   SUB-THEME C

Our Merkinch LNR is so much more than just a nature reserve

Topics:

How can looking backwards help us move our reserve forwards?

How can Merkinch LNR change both Merkinch and Inverness for the better?

How can users get more involved with events and activities on our reserve?

4.3   Interpreting historic significance and context

4.3.1   Distant past

The distant past is well documented within the management plan and is of some interest, especially to local schools exploring the reserve through a local studies/changing environment approach, although to many people living in merkinch today it is meaningless as it has no personal connection to them.

Old maps and accounts of land holdings within the reserve could be published online alongside modern maps so that comparisons may be made.

4.3.2   Immediate past/living memory

This is absolutely critical to the encouragement of local ownership. Local oral history is rich and varied and would benefit from its own recording project. Many contacts for this have been made during the course of researching this interpretive plan and are listed in Appendix C. Using children to collect memories from older family and friends has been especially successful and could be expanded (see sample Merkinch Memory survey form in Appendix B.)

It is simple to attach sound files within a website so that these recordings could be easily played, perhaps with a photograph of the 'face' who is reminiscing.

Subjects which can be explored include:

- Memories of specific individuals (such as Willie-the-Carse)

- Memories of particular activities/places (such as swinging from the Monkey Puzzle Tree at the Canal End, or playing Cattie in the West Fields)

- Memories of local community spirit (strives after a wedding, collections for the local bereaved)

- Memories of the hardship of life (travellers' tales, running from the 'detectives' after pinching coal), poverty and limited choices for entertainment

- Memories of using the reserve area both practically and for fun: getting free buckets of herring, skating on the frozen marshes, fishing for flukies

NB: When using these recollections in interpretation, care should be taken to warn against copying any or all of the more daring activities.

Collecting these memories will serve many purposes as well as the obvious one of recording them for posterity:

- It will show local people that the reserve designation need not change their sense of ownership of the place

- It will increase people's feeling of belonging to the area

- It will place a value on people's memories

- It will encourage respect for and interest in the reserve today

NB This element of the interpretation project would be supported and assisted by Highland Archives and Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (see Appendix C for contacts).

4.4 Interpreting wildlife and habitats

4.4.1 General

The RSPB understands the ability of a one-species focus to draw people into the wider world of birdwatching and wildlife appreciation (c.f. Boat of Garten Ospreys, Huntly Peregrines).

Merkinch has a thriving population of herons, which fortunately nest off the reserve, on the hills below Craig Phadraig. These birds are there all year round and are as strong a feature of the local coastal landscape as are the bottlenose dolphins.

Herons use the same nests year on year and they grow vast with age. Their large eggs are pale blue and their young spectacularly ugly. They fly like pterodactyls, with heavy wing-beats. They are shy birds and yet they will stand still and tolerate the presence of humans rather than miss a fish.

These 'dinosaur birds' could become the USP for the reserve, featuring on its logo, their lifecycle and nests closely monitored via webcams once the centre is built. They are not rare or endangered - but they are fascinating and it's difficult to see them up close.

There does not seem to be an international centre which majors on heron-viewing - so why not Merkinch LNR? The RSPB would be interested in discussing overlapping interests in the event of this recommendation taking flight.

Through an appreciation of one bird in detail can grow a lifelong love of all the rest.

4.4.2   Other birdlife

The birdlife of the reserve varies according to location within the reserve (whether woodland, grassland, coastal or marshland) and also seasonally. Some (like the herons) are there all the time; other migrants come and go. This perfectly reflects the human population of Merkinch: the long-established families who have endured much and are proud to be Merkinchers, and the transient, ever-changing short term residents, many of whom have social issues to deal with. A feature of all natural interpretation here should be the mirroring of human life where possible, so that people are encouraged to look at wildlife with empathy.

A panel or other interpretive resource featuring any bird here might also feature a local birdwatcher talking about why he/she likes it a more personal and local approach than the standard neutral panel narrative. This approach could be taken on the orientation panels which will be required both at Ferry Pier Point and Canal End (where the panels will be overlooked and so offered a degree of protection from vandalism.

Virtual interpretation about resident bird populations which can be printed off and taken into the reserve by individuals, rather than by having interpretive panels within the reserve where the birds can be seen, is the best approach (the birds move around so it helps if interpretation is portable too!). This can be promoted through local schools and groups and can be more easily updated than any static interpretation on site.

Calling the most south-westerly pool Heron Pool is a subtle way of emphasising the importance of this particular birdlife on the reserve, encouraging people to walk over there to see the herons.

4.4.3   Plantlife

Plantlife in the reserve is rich and varied, including many different species of tree, flower, reed, grass and seaweed. Fixed panels which interpret these rapidly changing and fragile species may also draw the attention of vandals, putting both structure and some plants at risk. The virtual approach outlined in 4.3.1 above is the way to go here too. The website can carry large amounts of recording information presented in an easy-to-understand way, so that users can not just identify plants but understand how frequently they occur, and when.

4.4.4   Mammals

The dominant mammal on the reserve is humankind and this should be stressed at every opportunity. Humans have dictated the structure and appearance of the reserve: although a nature reserve it is anything but natural, like most 'countryside' in the UK. Seals, dolphins and otter all occur around the coastal edge of the reserve but it is the resident population of deer, managing to

breed and increase in such close proximity to such dense human habitation, which is the most striking mammal story to tell here.

Many local people have seen deer and enjoy their presence. It will be good to help people understand more about the life cycle of the deer but again, on site interpretation should be handled cautiously to avoid over-emphasising their presence and putting the animals at risk.

4.4.5   Insects

Insect-life is fleeting and would best be interpreted through spring and summer ranger-led 'bug hunts' pond-dipping sessions and 'butterfly walks' aimed at particular audiences. Seasonal insectlife can also be interpreted through the website.

4.4.6   Amphibians

Many older people remember collecting tadpoles from the marshes and carrying them home in jam jars. The frog life cycle is so extraordinary that it is an unfailing popular story to tell. It would be good to restore freshwater pool frog-breeding locations within the reserve as local children would enjoy the tadpole-spotting, and the additional source of food would be popular among birdlife.

4.4.7   Lichens, bryophytes and fungi

These exist on site and lichens, in particular, are evidence of good air quality. Ranger-led fungi forays in the autumn might be feasible depending on the extent of fungi to be found – a useful health & safety message can be communicated at the same time. Lichen and fungi identification sheets could be made available on the website.

5.   **Audience objectives**

Local resident who uses a motorised wheelchair – and four legged friend

5.1   General principles

These objectives are all about how you as a management team want to encourage change in people through their interaction with Merkinch LNR.

5.2   Learning objectives

- We want local people and visitors to look closely at the reserve and its wildlife and plantlife all year round and enjoy what they see

- We want local children and their parents to learn to enjoy and possibly to identify the living creatures (different birds, mammals and amphibians) that live on site

- We want children and their parents to learn about and be able to spot the changes to things that grow (trees, lichens, plants, fungi) through the seasons

5.3   Emotional objectives

- We want no-one to feel excluded from the reserve

- We want everyone to feel safe and relaxed during their visit

- We want everyone to feel a sense of personal connection and engagement with the reserve

- We want everyone to leave after a first visit full of enthusiasm to tell others

- We want whole families to share the experience of the reserve between their generations

- We want people who live here to feel greater pride in Merkinch as a result of using the reserve

5.4   Locational objectives

- We want people to use the map of the reserve

- We want people to understand how the reserve connects to the rest of Inverness

- We want everyone to understand the various paths and circuits available to them within the reserve

- We want to encourage people to move beyond the entry points at the canal and at Pier Point and into the reserve to explore it

- We want people to access the reserve using green transport where possible

5.5   Behavioural objectives

- We want the local community to want to reduce anti-social activity on the reserve

- We want to stop fly-tipping on the reserve

- We want teenagers to be able to use the reserve positively and safely

- We want to reduce the amount of broken glass on the West Fields

- We want to stop illegal motor/quad biking through the reserve

- We want people of all physical and mental ability to feel they can explore the reserve safely

6.   **Mapping and routing on site**

Inscription on tree, off The Snakey path

6.1   **General principles**

The site map should become the main interpretive tool for the reserve. It will be produced both as a clear black and white version for use as a handout and a more colourful one for use within orientation panels, online etc**.**

The map will quite deliberately provoke discussion of old names and their locations and there will be criticism – but this is a starting point for more positive engagement.   The map will have a friendly feel and should encourage people to explore.

6.2   Map of Merkinch LNR (hand-drawn – see names list in 1.2.2.)
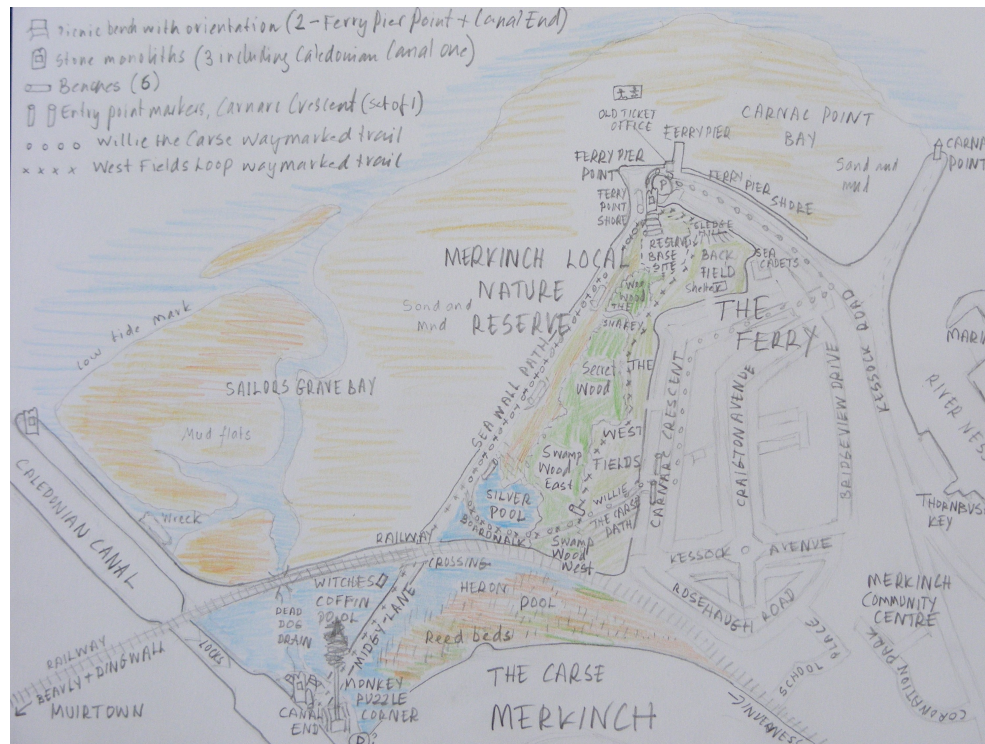
A larger version of this map is shown in Appendix A.

7.   On-site interpretive resources

A train whips through the reserve crossing

7.1   General principles

It would be perfectly feasible to approach this project the way in which most other groups do so:
seek funding for a list of on-the-ground interpretive structures such as benches, interpretive panels,
waymarking etc and install them all as rapidly as possible, with a big event to celebrate their
installation.

This approach will not work here: if it were attempted, the structures would be rapidly vandalised and this would lead to a significant waste of money. Such features can be installed over time but they have to be 'grown' within the local community first. Their design – with the maximum community input possible - needs to be celebrated ('News & Views' is an excellent vehicle for this) but their *installation* needs to be piecemeal and done quietly so that they appear without a big flurry of attention.

Any vandalism should not be reported in the local press, but should be put right again, and again, and again, until the vandals get used to seeing the structures there and get bored with the process. It will be frustrating and there will be setbacks but ultimately it will be worth it.

7.2   People

7.2.1.   A local ranger

It is absolutely essential for the reserve to have a 'face' and as soon as possible: its own dedicated ranger or warden should be appointed quickly.   This should be a permanent paid post managed within Highland Council's Ranger team: it's great to use volunteers managed off-site but they will tend to change frequently and this reserve needs consistency.   Ideally this person would be recruited from within the Merkinch community and have a good knowledge of and friendly relationship with local people.

7.2.2.   Community group advocates

Once appointed the ranger needs to attend the meetings of all community groups locally, including all those listed in 2.1. Group-specific activities will build confidence in using the reserve with people among their peers so that the reserve becomes somewhere to go with friends.   This means that instead of promoting a bird-watching event, where a group of strangers may come together for the event and then disband, a specific community group would be approached and offered one as a group instead. The take-up of these opportunities will be higher as people are more likely to go along with those they know and like - and their impact more sustainable.

Some people within these groups could themselves be trained as a 'Green Team' of community rangers, voluntary but with a role to play in encouraging people to get out there and use the reserve. Some likely community ranger candidates or sources of them have been identified in Appendix C.

7.3   Ticket office

Although the ticket office is not part of the LNR project, its function as a point where people can use toilets and possibly have a cuppa is an important one – and until the new centre opens there will be nowhere else suitable. Once the old building is refurbished, it could be feasible to have a rota of local people willing to open up, even if only for a few hours every day, during the warmer spring/summer months, and these times could be advertised locally and arranged so as not to clash with other uses of the building.

Once the early interpretive material relating to people's use of the site has been digitised, it would also be simple to produce good-quality but inexpensive panels on foamex for display inside.

Tea-making facilities should remain informal in order to avoid any contravention of food hygiene regulations.

7.4 Orientation

The reserve requires two orientation panels, one at Canal End, and one at Pier Point. These should carry a highly pictorial panel with the map of the reserve on each and a 'you are here' sign. Each should carry pictures of significant local people – particular from long-established families which engender local respect – telling some aspect of the story as well as images of the birds, plants and animals you might see on the reserve.

There should be no funding logos on the panels – this will reduce the likelihood of vandalism as it will look less official (funders can be acknowledged on the Merkinch website instead).

The panels should not be standalone as the risk of vandalism is that much greater to something which appears pointless and impractical. Benches survive better than anything else on the reserve and so one of the interpretive bench designs should allow for a high back with a panel incorporated into it.

7.5 Interpretive panels

We do not recommend formal interpretive panels anywhere within the reserve. The information which would normally appear on these should be published online in a print-off format.

We do however recommend interpretive panels within Merkinch itself where they are overlooked and offered some protection (Grant Street; Merkinch Community Centre) or high on gable ends where they are out of reach. These should again look as unofficial as possible and consist of a large attractive image – a view, or a bird or deer – and the words along the lines of 'take a fresh look at Merkinch – your local nature reserve – free and easy, just XXX minutes away'

7.6 Waymarking

Some chunky wooden low-rise waymarking on site is worth the risk of vandalism. These should be specially designed in rounded timber for Merkinch LNR and could have a heron, a butterfly or other natural feature routed into it. The routes waymarked should take people in a circuit from Pier Point, along Sea-wall Path, down the boardwalk and along Willie-the-Carse Path into Carnarc Crescent and then back to Pier Point. This quite deliberately offers a circuit both off and on the reserve. The markers installed in Carnarc Crescent will be a reminder of the reserve's existence.

7.7 Interpretive benches

This should be a specially-designed suit of benches and picnic tables which can be installed as required within the reserve and at the entry points.

Benches designed for 'internal' reserve use should be comfortable but very solid, concreted into the ground, with some quotations from named local people's recollections of the place routed into the back.

The design of these benches should be community-led and celebrated, but the installation should be done quietly and piecemeal (see phasing in Section 11.). Suitable locations are:

- Ferry Pier (1 bench with orientation panel – see 7.4 above)

- Sea Wall path (x3 benches, one above the boardwalk looking over Silver Pool)

- Midgy Lane (x1 bench)

- Junction of Willie-the-Carse Walk and Swamp Wood (x1 bench)

- Basketball Court (x2) – plain benches, for use by teenagers and those watching play on the court, but ideally a purpose-built 'teenage shelter' instead

- Monkey-puzzle corner (x2 picnic benches, one with orientation panel – located on an extended area of canal bank so above the reserve itself and overlooked from the other side of the canal)

7.8   Bird blinds

We do not recommend the installation of bird blinds on this site within the next five years:

- they appear pointless to the uninitiated and so are likely to be vandalised

- they could provide cover for someone with an air rifle to shoot wildlife or people

- birdlife on the reserve is not particularly shy of humans anyway (in fact persuading people not to feed the ducks may be something of an issue!)

This issue should be reviewed after five years and if positive usage has greatly increased, the possibility of bird blinds or hides could be reconsidered.

7.9   Entry point structures

We have already observed that the monolith at Ferry Pier Point could usefully be moved to be at right angles to the existing location, giving it more of a backdrop of the reserve itself.

The two panels on these entry point structures could be in etched metal to reduce the possibility of vandalism, bolted on without screw heads showing if possible.   They should not carry practical information (this will be done on the bench-back orientation panels which can be more easily changed) but could usefully carry a particularly moving or vivid piece of poetry or oral history about how local people feel about the area, in both English and Gaelic.

7.10   Focal points

In time, as the community grows into using the reserve in more positive ways, it will become desirable to have some artistic/natural focal points within the reserve which also interpret the rich past:

Year 3

- A replanted, good size monkey puzzle tree, with an attractive interpretive tree guard carrying people's memories of playing on the old canal bank Monkey Puzzle, also at Monkey Puzzle Corner

Years 6 - 10

- A cluster of life-size wooden ponies on the edge of the Back Field (travellers' history – chainsaw carving)

- A life-size statue of King Brude gazing up at Craig Phadraig (Monkey-Puzzle Corner), possibly based on a real local person's face (chainsaw carving)

7.11   Welcome point building

This centre will require its own business/management plan and should be designed with as wide a range of uses as possible, notably:

A great cafe using local produce where possible with interpretive theming of decor and menus

Indoor/outdoor performance space for drama/performance/presentations about the reserve etc

Viewing tower/platform with telescopes (access from inside building for added security)

Security cameras trained on the reserve area built into tower design

Space for permanent/temporary exhibitions on human and natural aspects of the reserve area

Learning base for schools with bag dump, indoor picnic area etc

Webcam observation area for herons/heronry

Ranger's accommodation within the building to increase site security

Environmentally-friendly, perhaps using Earthship technology and access for all within building

Green loos

Future interpretive exhibitions here could draw on local people's memories of the reserve as well as celebratory descriptions of what goes on/can be seen today. It would be good to have cafe nights for specific age groups on particular evenings, with activities designed to appeal to specific audiences. It needs to feel like every local groups' clubhouse.

'The Westfield Centre' as mentioned in the management plan may not be the best name (but is fine as a working title) for the reasons outlined in Section 1 – a competition among local children/residents to name the building once the plans are established would increase interest and ownership. 'Centre' can sound very official, uninviting and uncool, and there may be confusion with

the community centre down the road. St Cessoc (original local Celtic saint) has been mentioned as part of any future title but the religious overtone might be alienating for some potential users and this would need market testing.

8. Off-site/portable interpretive resources

Architecture within The Ferry/Merkinch

8.1 General principles

As the scope for on-site interpretation, especially in the early years of this plan, is limited, off/site and portable resources are far more significant than in any run-of-the-mill interpretive project. Print-off/carry-in online resources will be particularly important.

Promoting the reserve beyond its boundaries using overlapping marketing and interpretive techniques will also bear fruit in terms of encouraging usage by local and non-local markets.

8.2 Infiltrative interpretation (Merkinch/South Kessock estates and Inverness)

Infiltrative or 'guerilla' interpretation is interpretation which occurs in unexpected places. This needs to be more coordinated than just brightening up a drab corner with a pretty picture. It needs to shock and provoke, challenging people's pre-conceived ideas about Merkinch as a place and remind people that it is there. This interpretation can deliberately be moved and changed, so that something fresh is always appearing somewhere unexpected. Likely locations for these large pictorial panels would be:

Examples within Merkinch

Grant Street 'square'

Merkinch shops (inside and outside)

Merkinch Community Centre

Gable-ends, Carnarc Crescent

Merkinch Primary School

Inverness High School

Gable-ends, flat sides, Benula Road

Examples outside Merkinch

Inverness Station

Inverness Airport

Inverness Bus Station

Inverness Library

Highland Council Offices

Eden Court Theatre

Inverness Leisure Centre

8.3   People

Everywhere in this plan we stress the importance of the role of encouraging local people within specific interest groups to become advocates of the reserve. Whether through volunteers or paid staff, every effort should be made to ensure a good knowledge base about the reserve and its natural life and the past of Merkinch with which it is interlinked.

Volunteers and staff come and go and so the ideal way to make sure that knowledge is efficiently pooled is to develop a simple system of ring binders which contain every current piece of useful information about Merkinch (often referred to as 'bibles' at other sites which use the approach). They should be updated every three months by a different member of the reserve team and are therefore a good way of pooling knowledge. There should be several sets of these and whenever information is added to one it should be copied and added to them all with categories as diverse as plant life, mammals, transport, early history, living memory and useful contacts. Whenever a new volunteer is recruited, the 'bible' is then ready to use as part of their training.

8.4 Leaflet

This is not a site which would benefit from the immediate production of a promotional leaflet (the postcard approach already initiated is a better one). Leaflets are wasteful in terms of paper, date quickly and Merkinch is not a site where they could be dispensed from a purpose-built stand at the entrance.

It will however become desirable to develop a recognisable poster style for temporary notices (invitations to participate in reserve events, for example) and a reserve logo should be produced which will work online, on printed material or clothing, and in timber or stone.

Instead we recommend the production of the Merkinch LNR map as a robust, wipe-clean A4 handout –map on one side, a montage of 'what you can see' images on the other – which should be given out free to all local primary school children and should clearly state that they have helped in its creation.

8.5 Website

The website will be critical to the success of interpretation on the reserve. A very high proportion of local residents – even older people – do own computers – like the TV they have become an essential rather than a luxury.

The website should be frequently updated, highly pictorial, simple to use, but also act as a database of more detailed information on the reserve's history and natural history. Within it there should ideally be a reserve blog (the writer could change periodically) and a facility where archive images can be showcased and discussed online by the local community.

Local people should be also encouraged to mail in their current images of life on the reserve for possible publication (see http://www.black-isle.info/cromarty/imagelibrary/)

The website can hold a series of downloadable factsheets about the reserve's natural life, including:

- Roe deer
- Otters
- Seals
- Dolphins
- Herons
- Mallard
- Tufted Duck
- Tidal Marshes
- Spring plants
- Summer plants
- Autumn fungi

- Winter tracks

- Tree leaves

It will also include a downloadable map and up-to-the-minute events details. The investment in a good website can be offset by a pared-down approach to on-site interpretation.

8.6   Local newsletter/newspaper input

Although a massive amount of positive things happen in Merkinch, it does not always have a 'good press', notably in the Highland News. The reserve team needs to make considerable efforts to show the reserve in a positive light in all local papers and the local News & Views newsletter: a 'what's to see this month' feature in the newsletter during the summer months and a 'remember when...' feature based on images of the reserve's past history in the winter – each time with a reminder of the reserve website - would be very popular.

As well as frequently placing stories in local newsletters and newspapers, ensuring a 'good press' must also mean not publicising any vandalism of structures on site (to avoid the 'oxygen of publicity'). There will be setbacks, and the team needs to accept that - but quiet replacement is more effective as a deterrent than adverse publicity. People's confidence in the area will grow but initially it will be fragile and easily broken by an over-the-top newspaper headline.

8.7   Buses

The No 14 Bus runs between Merkinch and Milton of Leys, crossing Inverness in the process. Shelters and stops along this route are a good location for 'guerilla' interpretive panels, as is the interior of the bus itself.

Once the reserve centre is up and running, consideration of a park & ride scheme from the centre of Inverness could be investigated.

8.8   Site marketing

Marketing and interpretation have particularly strong links at Merkinch and some marketing approaches based on the 'fresh look' theme are outlined in 7.5.

9.   Evaluation

Visitor enjoying a new Ferry Pier bench

Evaluation of the success of differing elements within this plan is important and should consist of the following:

9.1   Baseline survey

A vox pop survey made as a baseline at the beginning of the project at one or two specific points in Merkinch (not the reserve) such as Merkinch Primary School, Grant Street and Merkinch Community Centre.

Baseline questions should include:

General awareness of the reserve: location, access, usage, wildlife, paths etc

Personal usage

Preconceptions

This should be done by offering a 'balanced five' responses to a question, two negative, two positive and one neutral, e.g.:

How likely is it that you will visit Merkinch local nature reserve in the next month?

a.   Very likely

b.   Fairly likely

c.   Not sure

d.   Fairly unlikely

e.   Most unlikely

The responses should always be spoken, not written, to avoid issues with illiteracy within the area which can cause embarrassment.

This survey should be repeated annually with some commonality but also some changes where new features have been installed (e.g. reserve boundary monolith inserts) or new resources are available (e.g. website). Each question should be asked twice, once 'before' and once 'after'. They should test general attitude/awareness as well as usage.

9.2   Record-keeping

It is important not to think of evaluation as something which someone else does. It should be fundamental to the attitude of every volunteer and every staff member on the reserve. Careful record keeping of informal feedback from reserve users: all comments, positive and negative should be recorded and fed back within the team, possibly using a balanced category format so that results can be compared year on year (e.g. complaint about dog mess – A, complaint about broken glass – B, complaint about litter – C, positive feedback on paths – D, positive feedback on walk or other event – E, positive feedback on newly-installed features – F.

This simple approach should be outlined in the 'bible' (see 8.3) and will allow a continuous feel for perception of the reserve among users. Every member of the team, whether paid staff or volunteers, should channel positive or negative feedback into a central point and be able to monitor the overall results – a simple whiteboard approach which is logged at the end of each week is effective.

These collated statistics could be open to public scrutiny via the website, with action taken where appropriate: this transparency would appeal greatly to funding bodies.

10. Interpretive planning recommendations (Years 1 – 5)

Year 1.

A.   Seek funding for and recruit a permanent 'face for the place' ranger, ideally someone patient, good humoured, energetic - and local to Merkinch.

B.   Seek funding for and begin work on the LNR website, with user-friendly 'top pages' and much more dense, database style information on the natural life of the reserve further in.   Publicise its development as widely as you can and encourage local input from schools and the community. Ensure the reserve has its own URL, even if embedded in an existing site.

C.   Complete and publicise the LNR map (downloadable from website) both as a basic black and white and more detailed colour version – present it at Merkinch Primary as an achievement which is largely their own - give every child a wipe-clean A4 version. Big celebration and press coverage. Use laminated versions within reserve at entry points until orientation benches installed.

D.   Encourage as wide a range of local schools and Merkinch groups as possible to come into the reserve as groups for free led activities. (Avoid promoting events on a particular theme without targeting a particular group as the take-up will not be as good – people feel safety in numbers!)   These need not all be naturally focused – Mums & Toddlers, for example, might simply enjoy a stroll and a teddy-bears picnic. It's a question of building confidence and good usage habits. You may need to repeat events for some groups several times.

E.   Work out a mini-management plan with all users for the old ticket office which at least allows access to toilets on the days when organised led activities take place.

F.   Commission local poetry or seek other site-specific oral history memories within local population to be etched into a metal plaque for insetting into the stone monoliths at each end of the canal (NB English and Gaelic required): these should NOT be viewed as orientation panels, they are simple entry point markers. Celebrate the design pre-installation – then install quietly.

G.   Commission a design for a Merkinch LNR logo, which could include a heron and the 'take a fresh look at Merkinch' slogan: needs to work routed into timber, printed on to paper or cloth, carved into stone and online.

H.   Hold a mountain-biking/cycling safety day on the reserve specifically targeting local primary and secondary pupils (in conjunction with Highland Council Rangers, Forestry Commission Scotland and local community police team) encouraging people to use the reserve cycling, but reinforcing the increasing risks and penalties of quad and motor-bike use on the reserve.

I.   Hold an open funday at the reserve in early autumn to which all groups which have been brought separately are invited together, and make this an annual event during which groups can do their own reserve-based activities with an audience – and snowballs into something for everyone.

J.   Commission the design for new Merkinch LNR benches and picnic benches

K.   Commission the design for two new Merkinch LNR waymarkers: the design must be robust and work in both the natural environment and as street-furniture

L.   Commission the designs for new 'guerilla' gable-end and other off-site display panels such as Grant Street and Merkinch Community Centre

M.   Commission the designs for the reserve gateway boundary markers at the junction between Willie-the-Carse path and Carnarc Crescent

N.   Undertake baseline evaluation

Year 2.

A.   Begin detailed interpretive planning alongside the design works for the interior of the new reserve Centre, notably the focus on herons.

B.   Within the groups which have been on frequent led activities in Year One, identify likely volunteers as community rangers and offer training as a group both in leading tours and in other wildlife/plantlife recording activities on site. This may need to be very flexibly timed to fit in with childcare, school hours (for secondary school pupils interested)and working arrangements. Begin to build up a 'bible' reserve manual for all volunteers.

C.   Encourage these 'volunteer community rangers' – who could have a better, specific name, such as 'The Merkinch Green Team' - to lead visits from their own original groups and then by others – train with a light hand, using lots of praise and encouragement.

D.   Incentivise this with social activities as a group, such as visits to other sites where volunteers are extensively used.

E.   Offer a Merkinch Green Team sweatshirt with the reserve logo as an incentive – only presented on completion of training and worn during 'official' activities.

F.   Begin the groundwork for establishing Merkinch as an international centre of excellence for the study of herons – the slogan 'dinosaur birds' may help the project gain support