

Wester Ross Biosphere Project

A Sustainable Development Initiative

End of Project Report

June 2015

Assist Social Capital CIC
Company Registration No. 270426
Telephone: 0772 5211 834
Email: info@social-capital.net



Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Wester Ross Biosphere Reserve Background Information	3
Wester Ross Biosphere Project (WRBP) Phase I – May to November	3
Wester Ross Biosphere Project (WRBP) Phase II - December to May	5

Wester Ross Biosphere Reserve Background Information

Since 1976, UNESCO has recognised Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve as a Biosphere Reserve (BR), due to its importance for biodiversity conservation and associated research. However, this site does not meet UNESCO's current criteria for the new style BRs, established in 1995, which **incorporates a wider focus on regional sustainable development**, rather than primarily emphasising conservation objectives. **To survive, older style BRs such as [Beinn Eighe](#) are required to apply for the new status.** For Beinn Eighe this means expanding the BR to a much larger area.

A scoping study by UHI in 2011/12 concluded that while there is considerable opportunity for a new-style BR as a **mechanism for driving development both within and between communities in Wester Ross**, work was required to enable an extended BR to fully realise its potential.

This led to a proposal by Assist Social Capital CIC (ASC), based on its work in BRs in Europe, Canada and Asia, to investigate local interest **in a new style UNESCO BR** (or extended BR) for Wester Ross.

ASC takes an asset based approach, focusing on participation, involvement and opportunity for all.

The aim of the proposal was to support local stakeholders in Wester Ross to address the following objectives:

- To investigate local interest in an application to revise the current old style BR through an extended Transition Area
- To facilitate opportunity for local public participation
- On the basis of local interest:
 - To work towards the delivery of a successful New Style BR application to the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme.
 - To work up a sustainable development plan for a new style BR in line with the values of the UNESCO MAB.
 - To facilitate and support community initiatives and a social enterprise approach.
 - To identify a long-term strategy for the effective delivery of sustainable economic development in and around an extended BR, to ensure the long-term viability of the project.

Wester Ross Biosphere Project (WRBP) Phase I – May to November

During Phase 1 the focus of activity was on meeting members of the local communities, relevant local organisations and businesses to raise awareness of the opportunity to make an application to UNESCO for an extended BR.

Over the course of the first 5 months the WRBP Development Officer attended 82 separate meetings, organised 2 Reference Group meetings and met with 65 different organisations (18 private, 30 third and 17 public sector). During that time she was able to engage with 556 individuals (186 formally through organised meetings and some 370 informally via local community events, markets, etc).

Activities Phase I

Quarter	No. of Meetings	Unique Orgs	Individuals	People reached (+ informal discussions)	Totals
1 st	50	38	52	121 (281)	402
2 nd *	32	27	22	65 (89)	154
Total	82	65	74	186 (370)	556

Local people and communities were interested to see how this project might add value to what they are already doing. This work built a good platform on which to go forward to Phase II, and for the Wester Ross Project to become more explicit.

Topics for the Proposed Wester Ross Biosphere to Consider

Feedback from those engaged in Phase I highlighted local interest in a Wester Ross Biosphere as a regional identity, an ‘umbrella’ or brand, encouraging sustainability, knowledge sharing and conservation:

- Nurturing short supply chains, such as a viable, local food network.
- Bridging lifestyles and expectations of diverse communities.
- Educational and knowledge sharing opportunities via UNESCO.
- Preserving biodiversity and improving the health of rivers, lochs and coastal waters.
- Encouraging sustainable communities.
- Development that isn’t over reliant on tourism.
- Enabling young people to stay in the area.
- A platform for supporting the diverse initiatives already taking place and those emerging.
- Connecting with Landowners.
- Focusing on moving away from dependency on ever dwindling subsidies to becoming more creative and diversifying income.
- Not being “just another initiative”.

Further details are available in the [Wester Ross Biosphere Interim Report](#).

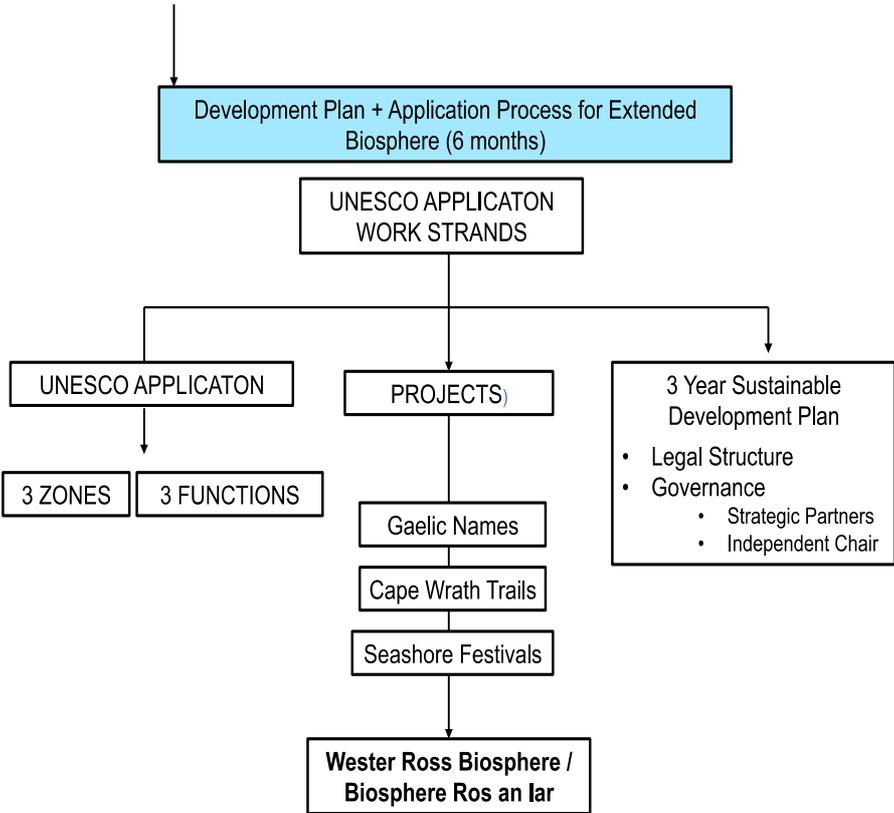
Wester Ross Biosphere Project (WRBP) Phase II - December to May

Phase I demonstrated there was a general feeling that a Biosphere could be a positive initiative for the region of Wester Ross. People felt there needed to be more networking and collaboration in general amongst the initiatives, projects and agencies' plans and hoped that a Biosphere in Wester Ross could act as a platform or 'brand' under which greater collaboration could be achieved. This backed up the findings of the scoping studies carried out in 2009 and 2011/12 and also the result of the kick off meeting in March 2014.

Having ascertained that the local community were still in favour of a Biosphere for Wester Ross, with the agreement from the Scottish Government and the 3 local agencies, ASC began work on Phase II.

The approach used in Phase II is outlined in the figure below.

Activity Plan for Phase II



This plan was outlined to the Reference Group in December 2014 and also at a meeting with the Scottish Government, SNH, HIE, the High Council and UK MAB on 12th of February 2015.

The focus for Phase II was therefore to;

1. Confirm the 3 zones and 3 functions,
2. Continue identifying and engaging with local projects that share the values of the biosphere;
3. Agree a governance model and a legal structure (possibly a SCIO) for the proposed biosphere, based on financial viability through a social enterprise approach

While more focused, Phase II continued with the participatory and asset-based approach adopted in Phase I. That included the process to confirm the zonation of the biosphere by a group of 15 people (at a meeting on 11th of February), made up of those with the skills required to identify core and buffer zones and community representatives. On the basis of this meeting a map was drawn of the new extended boundaries. New core and buffer areas beyond the original site at Beinn Eighe were established.

An important element of a BR translocation area is to work with an identifiable region with a sense of place that local communities are able to engage with. The area of Wester Ross provides a recognisable identity for a wide range of communities to associate with and also relates well to the local ecology (UHI Scoping Study 2012). In addition to the Zonation Working Group 3 public meetings took place in the main centres of population, which represented the 'gateway' communities of Ullapool in the north, Garve in the east and Kyle in the south. These meetings confirmed the local communities in these areas were keen to be involved.

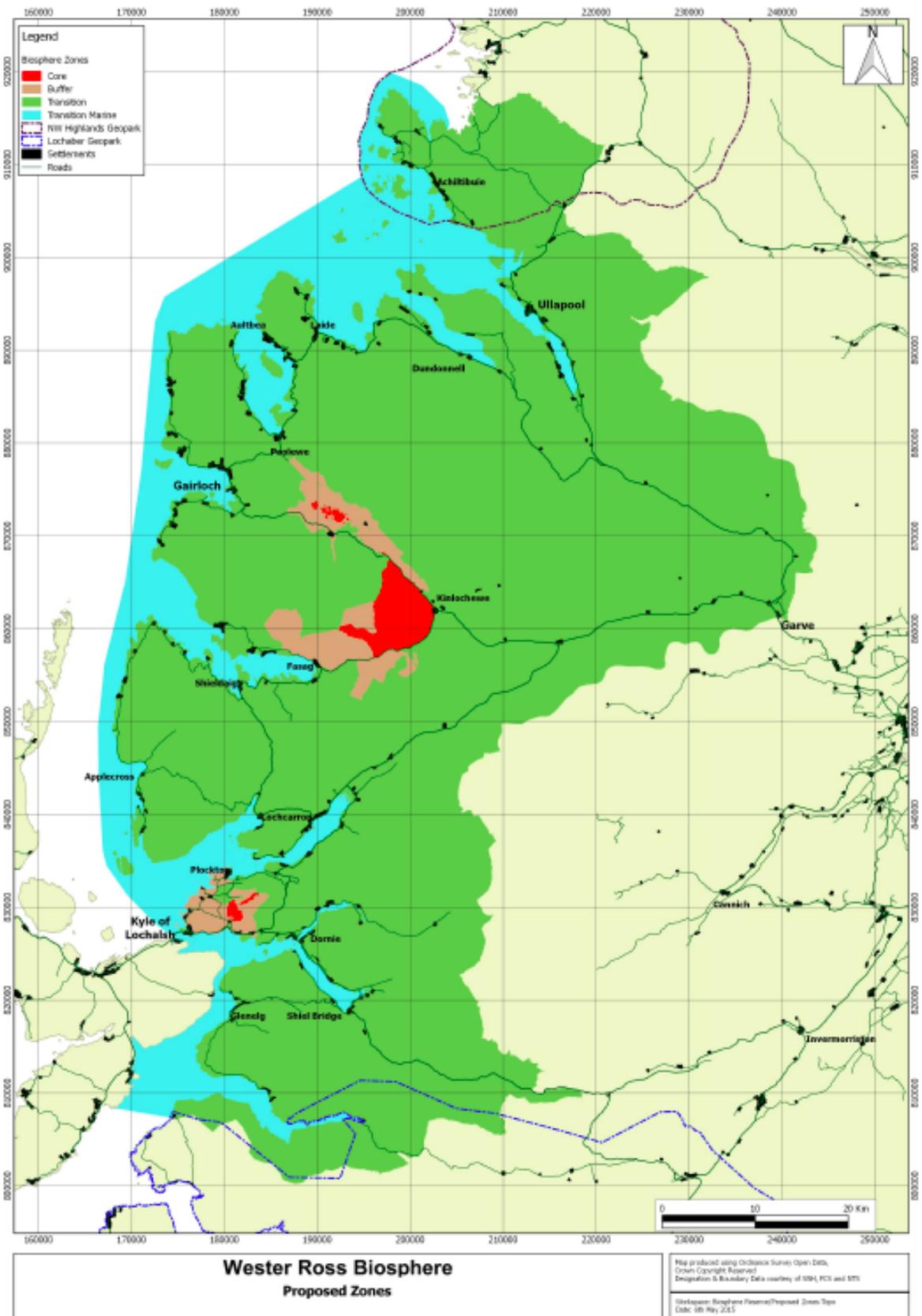
North; there is a small overlap with the south end of the North West Highland Geopark which takes in the Coigach peninsula. The NWH Geopark, Coigach Community Council and Coigach Community Development Company showed their support for this to occur. UNESCO confirmed to NWH Geopark that this was not an issue for them.

South; The Kyle of Lochalsh is within the boundary and the group agreed that it was natural to take in Glenelg and Arnisdale. Further consultation with Councillor George Farlow and Robbie Bain, Highland Council Ward Manager for Wester Ross, Strathpeffer & Lochalsh, increased the southern boundary to the southern edge of Ward 6 boundary, which roughly coincides with the northern boundary of the Lochaber Geopark.

East; Garve was agreed as the 'gateway' community in the east. From there the boundary runs north up towards Beinn Dearg and southeast towards Kyle.

West; A small section of coastal waters is included which allows for the importance of Wester Ross' connection with the sea to be recognised while avoiding issues around the MPA.

Wester Ross Biosphere Zonation Map



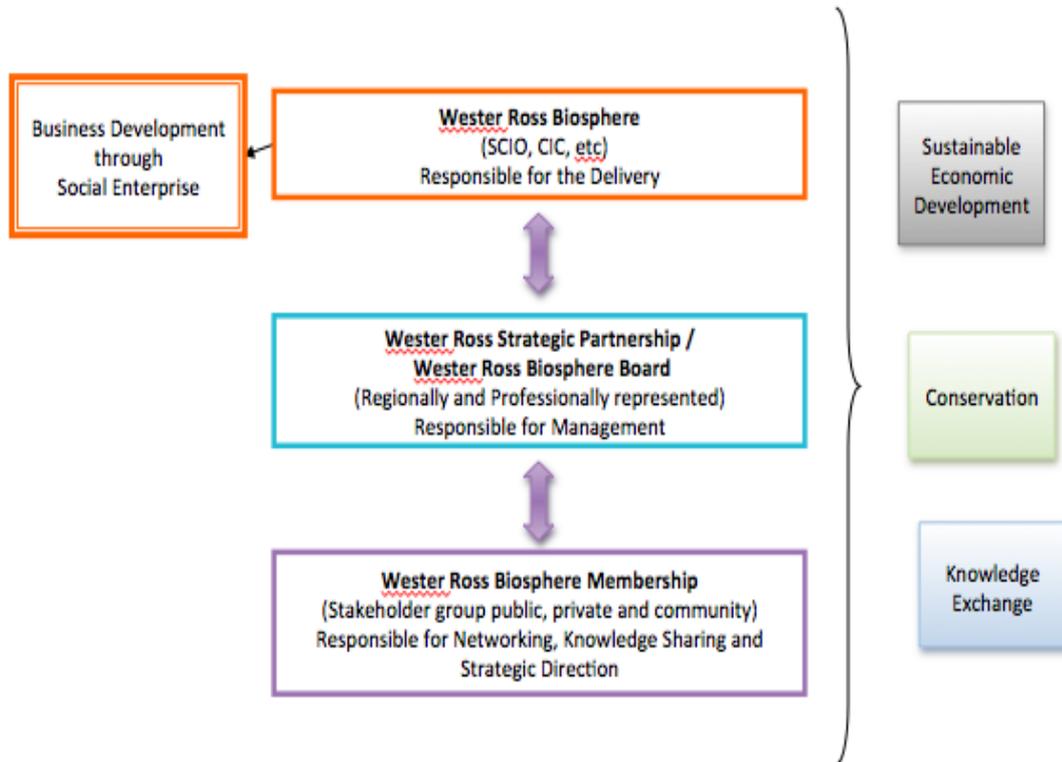
Breakdown of Wester Ross Biosphere

	Terrestrial (ha)	Marine (ha)	Total: (ha)
Core Area	5,337	0	5,337 (1%)
Buffer Zone	13,807	0	13,807 (3%)
Transition Area	416,217	94,543	510,760 (96%)
TOTAL:	435,361 (82%)	94,543 (18%)	529,904 (100%)

A Development Plan for Wester Ross Biosphere

A description of how the WRB will operate and be governed is required as part of UNESCO's nomination process. The description does not need to be in great detail, however a development plan, which enables stakeholders to fully participate and work together, strengthens the application; ensures stakeholders understand their roles; and helps everyone to work together to achieve the required outcomes for WRB. On 30th March 2015, an initial Strategic Partnership meeting took place in Achnasheen to consider the progress to date and discuss the next steps in the development of a Biosphere for Wester Ross. The meeting agreed to formally establish a Strategic Partnership for WRB and that this group should seek to become constituted as a cooperative organisation to take forward WRB.

WRB Structure



On 22 April 2015 The Skye Ross & Cromarty Area Committee of the Highland Council approved the Council signing-up to the Biosphere application, based on the proposed Development Plan.

Nomination Form

The UNESCO nomination process is based on a template form. This template was updated in 2013, so there are few examples of nominations from other BRs using this updated format. This meant there were not that many examples on which to learn from for the Wester Ross Biosphere nomination.

Due to the technical nature of the nomination form and UNESCO's requirements, ASC engaged a local technical coordinator for the process. The nomination coordinator sent the template out to everyone on the Reference Group, the Zonation Working Group and the key agencies and collected relevant information where possible, however much of the information was put together from relevant reference materials. The final document together with appendices is some 219 pages long.

A draft version of the nomination was sent to Professor Martin Price, Chair of the UK National Committee for UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, for him to edit.

The final copy will be sent to Professor Martin Price for signing. It will then be sent on to the Scottish Government, for formal approval and then on to the UK Government. Finally, the document will be sent to UNESCO in Paris to be lodged as the formal application for UNESCO

designation, no later than 30th of September 2015. Through his role as Chair of UK MAB Martin Price, will keep track of the progress of the nomination through the various Government Departments. The result will be announced by the ICC in March 2016, after the [4th World Congress of Biosphere Reserves](#) in Lima, Peru.

Last Meeting of the Wester Ross Biosphere Project

ASC's role comes to an end with the finalisation of the nomination. The last meeting of the Wester Ross Biosphere Project (WRBP), took place on 28th of May. The aim of this meeting was to bring people up to date with progress of the project, the nomination and more specifically to discuss the next steps to take forward the progress of the proposed Wester Ross Biosphere (WRB).

The meeting agreed that it is in the best interests of a new Wester Ross Biosphere (WRB), for a local organisation to take on the role of hosting the next stage in the process on behalf of the WRB Strategic Partnership, until the new WRB organisation has been legally established.

This would include the following activity:

- Applying for the necessary funding for the Interim Period
- Hosting a suitably qualified Interim Development Officer
- Organising and administering meetings of the Strategic Partnership (2-3)
- Liaising with the Strategic Partnership on the new constitution
- Engaging a lawyer (e.g. [Senscot Legal](#)) to set up the legal structure
- Beginning the process of sourcing funding for the new WRB organisation

Additional support could include;

- Keeping the wider community informed (e.g. through facebook)
- Developing and distribute an awareness raising leaflet for the WRB
- Developing a WRB website (if funding is available)
- Organising a launch event for the new WRB (circa March 2016)

Highland Council will take on a lead role to work with other local agencies to identify funding to take the process forward. The role would be time limited and will be carried out by a host organisation (possibly SCF) on behalf of the WRB Strategic Partnership. The tender for this work is likely to be advertised publicly to ensure transparency of the process.

Summary

The Wester Ross Biosphere Project was designed using social capital principles to engage and connect the local community on a shared project at a regional level. The typical nomination process can take between 6 -10 years, and costs in region of £1,000,000. ASC's approach achieved a great deal in 12 months for less than £100,000 and established a strong network of engaged individuals and organisations in a region whose topography has historically disconnected them.

Contact:

Colin Campbell

Executive Director, Assist Social Capital CIC

T. 0772 5211 834

colin@social-capital.net