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## COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

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Nikki Milne  
Scottish Executive  
Environment & Rural Affairs Department  
Marine Management Division  
Area GH93, Victoria Quay  
Edinburgh, EH6 6QQ

Dear Ms Milne

### SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE CONSULTATION - SCOTLAND'S FIRST COASTAL & MARINE NATIONAL PARK

Having considered the Scottish Executive consultation on Scotland's First Coastal and Marine National Parks, the response of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is as follows:

#### Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar response to the consultation document.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar wishes to inform Scottish Ministers that it does not support any proposal for designation of part or whole of the Outer Hebrides as a coastal / marine national park. The Comhairle is opposed to national park designation on the following grounds;

- the introduction of significant new layers of bureaucracy;
- the transfer of powers to a National Park Authority (NPA);
- the potential for additional constraints to be imposed on the fishing industry;
- possible future constraint on the development of renewable energy projects eg the upgrading of the inter-connector.

The Comhairle would maintain that it is already working successfully with other agencies to take a co-ordinated approach to a range of socio/economic and environmental issues facing the islands particularly through the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership, the Outer Hebrides Coastal Marine Partnership and the Outer Hebrides Inshore Fisheries Group.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar also wishes to oppose the designation of any area on the west coast of Scotland due to the possible negative impact on development in the Western Isles.

#### JUSTIFICATION FOR THE COMHAIRLE'S VIEW

The Comhairle is of the opinion that from an economic development perspective a coastal / marine national park in the Outer Hebrides (and indeed along the entire west coast of Scotland) should be resisted vigorously. While national recognition of the special qualities of the area conferred by national park status may attract more tourists and expand the tourism industry, it is considered that any expansion of that industry would not outweigh the possible constraints to economic development of other sectors, such as fisheries and renewables.

The **Outer Hebrides Community Plan** approved by the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership (OUCPP) has as its aim:

*"The creation of a prosperous and healthy community based on the principle of sustainable development through respect for the natural environment and the cultural traditions of the Western Isles".*

*Renewable Energy Innovation and Business Infrastructure* are two of its key drivers. As the lead agency in the Partnership, the Comhairle has adopted these objectives in its own approved **Corporate Strategy**.

The OUCPP's Economic Strategy **Creating Communities of the Future** is designed to link directly into the Scottish Executive's **National Planning Framework**. The economic drivers in the strategy are reflected in national policy. Section 177 of the Planning Framework relates directly to the Western Isles and states:

*"They (the Western Isles) are the principal heartland of Scotland's Gaelic culture and offer outstanding scenery and maritime habitats of international importance.*

*There are large international markets for Celtic culture, built heritage and environmental tourism.*

*There is considerable social capital, with high participation rates in community and voluntary activities.*

*Climate and geography offer great potential for harnessing renewable energy, particularly wind, wave and tidal power. There are also likely to be opportunities to provide support services for the development of Atlantic oil and gas reserves. Realising this potential demands co-ordinated action focused on measures to support, diversify and grow the economy, create high value jobs, retain and attract population, improve connectivity and communications, develop links with communities on Skye and the mainland, and upgrade the electricity transmission system".*

The Functions and Powers of a Park Authority will introduce significant new layers of bureaucracy, which is likely to hamper and stifle economic activity. A Park's Functions and Powers will potentially include:

- *Drawing up concordats, voluntary agreements, codes of conduct, etc;*
- *Entering into management agreements or drawing up and enforcing bylaws and management rules for the area;*
- *Becoming a statutory consultee to existing consultees thus ensuring its views are sought on proposals;*
- *Being given the responsibility for functions currently exercised by other public bodies or local authorities.*

No matter how well-meaning and well-intended at introduction, experience demonstrates that the establishment of the types of activity outlined in the four bullet points above will, at some stage, lead to conflict with business development interests.

The composition of the Park Authority will dictate the policies that the Park Authority will pursue. Given the process and the description of the candidate areas is heavily influenced by habitats and species, it would not be unreasonable to assume that these areas may be the key focus of any new Park Authority. There is real potential that the Park Authority may have amongst its membership environmental bodies that are presently campaigning aggressively against development of renewable energy in the Outer Hebrides. There is nothing to suggest that their approach, within a Park Authority, would be any less aggressively negative towards economic development opportunity.

On land, some 31% of the Outer Hebrides is presently under environmental designation. This compares to a national average of 8% across all Local Authorities. Whatever the original intention of these designations, there is little doubt that they are now being used as a tool to block, hinder and stifle renewable energy and related economic development in the Outer Hebrides. The contribution that the Outer Hebrides is making to safe-guarding the national and internationally important natural environment is already disproportionately high.

If an on-shore renewable industry is to be established in the Outer Hebrides it will require to move power south. The potential of doing this via sub-sea cable is presently being investigated. Although any future Park Authority may be neutral or supportive towards such a development, equally it should be recognised that it may take a negative view.

There is great potential in the waters around the Outer Hebrides for the creation (in the future when the technology can be deployed) of a wave and tidal renewables industry. That industry will require to place significantly scaled machines and related infrastructure into the seas. The future approach of any Park Authority towards that type and scale of development is presently unknown.

Given that uncertainty of approach, having in place a body, which may have critical, negative input in regard to the development of on-shore or off-shore renewables and any associated infrastructure, such as a sub-sea cable, may not be strategically advisable. Such an approach would be in conflict with the opportunities highlighted in the Scottish Executive's National Planning Framework.

The Comhairle is of the opinion that it should treat critically assurances that any future Park Authority would not seek to hamper economic development. Experience in the Outer Hebrides appears to demonstrate that any initial positive assurances in regard to development opportunities within designated areas will evolve towards a more negative approach if a development opportunity presents itself.

The aquaculture industry, which is a key economic contributor in some of the most peripheral communities of the Outer Hebrides, is extremely concerned about the prospects of a coastal / marine national park. That industry is presently heavily regulated and is therefore concerned about the introduction of another tier of potential regulation and bureaucracy. The introduction of another tier in one locality may place that area at a disadvantage when it comes to location and investment decisions.

At present the fishing industry is in the process of establishing an Inshore Fisheries Group (IFG), which will put in place local management plans for fisheries. The IFG is seen by the fishing industry as the most appropriate mechanism in regard to local fisheries management going forward. The IFG already contains a number of environmental bodies which will be able to raise any environmental issues as they relate to local fisheries. Given the introduction of the IFG, a coastal / marine national park would have little added-value to offer the fisheries industry.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

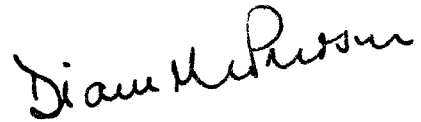
There is little doubt that the coastal and marine environment in and around the Outer Hebrides is of the highest quality. This is recognised by the extent of nature conservation designations already in place. It is also recognised that the quality of the natural environment is, at least in part, due to the management techniques employed by the people of the Outer Hebrides. They have managed and conserved that environment over the centuries and there is nothing to suggest that they will not continue to manage it equally successfully into the future. While a coastal / marine national park in the Outer Hebrides may be able to add to that successful stewardship and deliver a range of positive attributes in regard to conservation; planning; management; best practice and innovation, the consultation does not clearly set out how that would be achieved. Given that the Outer Hebrides have been able to maintain the marine environment to date without a National Park, it is not clear what purpose its introduction can serve.

The achievement of economic development is viewed by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar as a key strategic priority. There is a range of future opportunities in the marine environment, including a restructured aquaculture industry and a renewables sector. Given the economic constraints already in place in the Outer Hebrides the introduction of any new authority / new tier of bureaucracy that may potentially hinder development would not appear to be in the strategic best interests of the area.

It is in the interests of the people of the Outer Hebrides to seek to maintain maximum flexibility to allow economic decisions, in the best interest of the area, to be taken locally. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar believes this can best be achieved through its current partnership arrangements.

Once consideration has been taken of all the comments submitted on the consultation the Comhairle would appreciate a written explanation of how its comments have been taken into account.

Leis gach dùrachd

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Diane McPherson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'D'.

Diane McPherson  
Principal Policy Officer (Planning)  
Department for Sustainable Communities