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**STEERING COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT
OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL HABITATS
(CDPE)**

**Group of Specialists on Protected Areas
(PE-S-ZP)**

**THE FAIR ISLE NATIONAL
SCENIC AREA**

(United Kingdom)

Renewal of the European Diploma

Appraisal Report

by

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(Spain)**

1. No member of the Secretariat accompanied the consultant during his visit.
2. Resolution (90) 9 concerning the last renewal of the Diploma is reproduced in Appendix I; Appendix II contains a draft resolution concerning the Diploma's possible renewal in the near future.

A. INTRODUCTION

Fair Isle (an island of the Shetland group, United Kingdom) was awarded the European Diploma, category C, in 1985, and that award was subsequently renewed up to 21 September 1995. In accordance with Article 7 of the Regulations governing the European Diploma, I have conducted a fresh on-the-spot appraisal with a view to the Diploma's further renewal.

1. Terms of reference

In a letter dated 11 April 1994, the Secretariat of the Council of Europe requested the signatory of this report, Mr Joan Mayol, to visit Fair Isle in order to ascertain on the spot whether the conditions prevailing there are the same as they were when the Diploma was awarded or whether they have deteriorated or improved in the meantime.

1.1 Background

The Fair Isle national scenic area, managed by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) which owns the island, has been under Council of Europe patronage since 1985 when it was awarded the category C Diploma.

The Diploma was renewed on 18 June 1990 (442nd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies) until 21 September 1995.

The fact that we had taken part in the 1988 visit on the occasion of the first renewal of the Diploma (report PE-S-ZP (89) 30), meant that it was much easier for us to ascertain how the site had developed.

1.2 Details of the visit

The visit took place from 12 to 14 July 1994 in the company of Mr Alexander Bennet (NTS) who has been Factor of Fair Isle since 1985. We were assisted by Mr Anthony Bryant, NTS regional director for the Highlands, who was present at the time of our visit, Mr Nick Riddiford, ecologist, an islander formerly in charge of the bird Observatory, Dr Robin Turner, an archaeologist visiting Fair Isle to prepare a report for the NTS, and Dr Roger Riddington, Director of the bird Observatory.

1.3 Thanks

We wish to thank all the above mentioned persons and other islanders for their kindness and hospitality which greatly facilitated our work.

B. FIRST HAND OBSERVATIONS

Fair Isle is already well known to the Committee from numerous descriptive documents and annual reports. A detailed description is therefore unnecessary and we propose to concentrate on those aspects which highlight developments in the area since the previous visit.

The plan of the report will be similar to the one adopted in 1989, highlighting any changes and developments observed at first hand. Readers who wish to know more about the island may consult the bibliography in section D.

2. Geobiological characteristics of Fair Isle - New developments

None of the island's geobiological characteristics have changed since the last visit. NTS reports now acknowledge the international importance of the island's geological features, in particular those of geomorphological interest.

Knowledge of Fair Isle has improved considerably. Ornithological researchers continue the work of observing, counting and ringing birds. Botanical studies and research on invertebrates and other aspects are either terminated or in progress. Among other objects of study are moths, of which specimens are regularly taken. Other species have been added to the list of local invertebrates.

We can report the presence of a new plant species, *Najas flexilis*, reported in 1993, and the reappearance of *Huperzia selago*, last seen in 1894. Two or three species of lichen, new to the island, have also been located.

The orchid *Dactyloriza purpurela* is on the increase. Numbers have risen from 10 in 1981 to over a thousand this year, probably because ploughing is now less intensive and the islanders are taking a greater interest.

Other changes in the vegetation reported by the specialists are probably due more to climatic changes than to management methods.

2.1 Human and social aspects: recent developments

The social situation on Fair Isle is very much as we found it in 1988. Its 69 inhabitants form a dynamic and constantly active community. A new family is expected to arrive this year. The number of children is evidence of the community's vitality and its faith in the future: in the period from 1990 to 1993, between 5 and 10 children per year attended the Fair Isle school. There are 5 inhabitants per square kilometre, as compared with Shetland's 16 and Scotland's 66.

With regard to the island's social life, the compatibility of its economy with the environment and the quality of life in general, the situation is similar to the one we described in 1989, and in some cases better. There is no unemployment, the knitwear industry is flourishing, the amount of accommodation available in local homes has increased (a suggestion made in our previous report) and new environmentally benign activities have become a feature of Fair Isle's economic life.

The work camps continue (4 per year) and the result in social terms is good.

It is very interesting to report that archaeological excavations completed in the period between our two visits have shown that the island has been inhabited since 3500 BC. Thus the integration of human beings with the ecosystem goes back longer than the island's size and isolation suggested. Full archaeological data and an exhibition of objects discovered are on view in the small museum located in the George Waterson Memorial Centre.

2.2 Natural resources : changes

Birdwatching, in migration periods especially, is one of the island's greatest natural resources, both economically and socially. Improvements have been made to the FIBOT lodge: the outer walls have been renovated and various conveniences have been installed.

The number of bed nights in 1993 was 3,600, ie 83% of capacity (24 beds, 6 months of the year). The wreck of the tanker "Braer" in 1992 and the oil spill caused visitor numbers to decline at first, but the situation is now back to normal and the number of visitors is even beginning to increase.

The whale observation facilities together with the dyke which has now been built (about which more later) should help new forms of tourism to develop.

A number of small farming and croft improvement schemes have been completed with no noticeable adverse environmental impact. The sheep population is stable and in equilibrium with the vegetation. It is likely to fall slightly in the years ahead for economic reasons.

2.3 Conservation situation

2.3.1 Seabirds

The seabird colonies are still sizeable and, in the case of some species, actually expanding. Table 1 compares the most recent data with those presented in our last report.

There is a general upward trend in all but a few species. There is no doubt that the most remarkable performance is that of the Arctic tern (*Sterna paradisaea*), a rare species which finds abundant nourishment locally and good breeding conditions; this has not only increased the size of the colony but also permitted migration from other islands where nesting success is not so great.

The increase in numbers of the fulmar petrel (*Fulmarus glacialis*) - a biologically important phenomenon unknown in the Shetland islands in the early part of the century - could cause problems if the number of pairs were to increase so much as to oblige them as to occupy the sheep rearing areas, as the oily substance they produce impairs wool quality.

The population of 11 of the 14 seabird species present on the island represents over 1% of the total occurring in the United Kingdom; this is normally an accepted criterion in enhancing the value of a site.

Table 1: Size of seabird colonies on Fair Isle

Breed	1986	1992
Fulmar Petrel <i>Fulmarus glaciaris</i>	26,995 pairs	35,000
Storm petrel <i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>	100 pairs (1978)	Not recorded
Gannet <i>Sula bassana</i>	258 pairs	781
Shag <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	1098 pairs	1073
Great Skewer <i>Stercorarius skua</i>	84 pairs	110
Arctic skewer <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	115 pairs	109
Common gull <i>Larus canus</i>	12 pairs	10
Lesser black-backed gull <i>Larus fuscus</i>	22 pairs	22
Herring gull <i>Larus argentatus</i>	262 pairs	262
Great black-backed gull <i>Larus marinus</i>	113 pairs	113
Kittiwake <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	19,064 pairs	19,340
Common tern <i>Sterna hirundo</i>	26 pairs	17
Arctic tern <i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	83 pairs	1083
Raiser bill <i>Alca torda</i>	3950 birds	5000
Common guillemot <i>Uria aalge</i>	35,181 birds	32,000
Black guillemot <i>Cepphus grylle</i>	367 birds	382
Puffin <i>Fratercula arctica</i>	20,224 birds	23,000

2.3.2 Endemics and other biological assets

Fair Isle's endemics (*Troglodytes troglodytes fridarensis* and *Apodemus sylvaticus fridarensis*) are present in the same numbers as before. The former Fair Isle wren has been very closely monitored, and each year all the pairs (30-35) are located by ornithologists. For the past 40 years, the climate has thought to have created a situation of optimum stability (severe winters are a limiting factor for the Fair Isle wren). The small local population of Shetland starling is also stable.

The population of **grey seal**, (*Halichoerus grypus*) today numbers between 160 and 260 individuals which produce some 100 young every year. For an island of this size, this is a sizeable concentration. It is expanding.

Killer whales occasionally approach the island in search of a catch, and even come right into the creeks.

In recent years, there have been frequent sightings of Cetacea, not least the minke *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*. As we reported before, the species could be an asset for small-scale nature-loving tourism, and one which would be jeopardised if Norwegian commercial catches reduced the North Atlantic population of the species.

As on the occasion of our last visit, no new species has been introduced. There is still a total absence of rats.

2.3.3 Migratory birds

The activities of the bird observatory continue to focus on migration movements, which have symbolic significance, although research workers also spend time on other objects of study, including seabirds. Ringing continues, as to the regular observation and counting operations (10,787 birds were ringed in 1992). Migration is certainly an important phenomenon as it could signal a change of environment (climate etc).

2.3.4 Case of Falcons and Pigeons

An interesting example of the subtlety of the balance of nature and conservation is provided by the peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) and the rock dove (*Columba livia*). Up to 1973, one pair of falcons inhabited Fair Isle (there were two in the 1960s). Following the overuse of organochloric chemicals (outside the island) during that period, the species disappeared from the local fauna and became very rare in Shetland, where only one or two pairs survived. The rock dove (*Columba livia*) was its main prey, especially outside migration periods. The rock dove population was substantially increased by the unwitting introduction of domestic doves from releases effected at Lerwick for Aberdeen. The falcons eliminated the doves from the island, especially those whose plumage differed from that of the wild varieties. More and more of the doves one sees nowadays have an irregular plumage, and the wild species is undergoing genetic erosion. Reintroduction of the falcon might be a possibility, although the rarity of this species in the region would make it difficult; perhaps, too, the huge abundance of fulmar petrel would cause difficulties. Be that as it may, these are problems to bear in mind for further research.

3. Legal status and land ownership

The application to Scotland of the European Community "Habitat" Directive has led to Fair Isle being designated as a "Special Protected Area" (SPA); this is the most important change of status to occur this year.

Fair Isle's designation as an ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area) is very important. Environmental improvement schemes will cover 75% of all holdings, including the common grazing areas (that is to say 90% of the island in all).

There has been no other change of legal or land status to our knowledge.

4. Management

Management continues under the responsibility of the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) with the participation of the island's inhabitants and other agencies. The most important innovation has perhaps been the setting up of a housing forum whose priority is to rehabilitate improving the island's housing stock. This seemed to us a very constructive move, and one which could enhance the well-being of the island community still further.

4.1 Management Plan

When the Diploma was last renewed, a management plan was in preparation. It has been approved and applied over the past 5 years, and now the Management Plan 1993-1998 is in force. It was approved by the Council of the National Trust for Scotland on 23 April 1993. This is a very full document and more informative than its predecessor. The Plan has two basic functions: preservation (that is to say the maintenance of a viable and balanced community, the protection of the island's natural environment and preservation of its cultural identity) and the promotion of Fair Isle to the public in a recreational and educational context.

The two functions are sub-divided into 18 objectives which it would take too long to reproduce here. The most important ones concern housing conditions, waste management, non-polluting energy sources, biological conservation both on land and offshore, archaeology, education etc. One of the objectives featured in the Plan is to implement the recommendations embodied in the Council of Europe Diploma award.

4.2 Staff and infrastructures

Paul Harvey took over from N Riddiford as the observatory's warden in 1989. In 1993, Mr Paddy Jenks occupied this post, and the present warden is Dr Roger Riddington.

4.3 **Activities**

A number of activities in addition to those mentioned above are worth reporting.

Bracken cutting continues, but the system adopted has proved inadequate. The possibility of applying other methods in the future is being explored.

A new generator and a new cable network have been installed; it is planned to introduce a new system of windpower generation (a scheme to be financed by the European Community, since the island features in Objective 1).

5. **Research**

The work of studying and monitoring the natural and cultural assets of Fair Isle continues at a steady pace. More than 20 works have been published since 1989, which gives an idea of the volume of activity. Publications include the Fair Isle guide book, "Fair Isle, an island saga" and "The birds of Fair Isle".

6. **Problems and needs**

6.1 **Economic and social development**

New economic activities are being pursued on the island: there is an ecological advisory centre (N Riddiford), a stained glass restoration workshop, a traditional wooden boat building area, holiday homes etc.

Links with the Shetland islands are much the same as before and are considered sufficient. There are now 6 flights per week in summer. In 1993, 1,857 passengers came to Fair Isle on 628 flights (as compared with 458 flights bringing 1,654 passengers in 1987).

Opportunities still exist for making the island more attractive to nature-loving tourists. The sighting of whales, in particular *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, is one example.

In 1992, Fair Isle was designated an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) by the European Community, which opens up immense possibilities for maintaining and developing traditional and environmentally benign agricultural activities. The inhabitants are fully aware of the advantages which this measure offers, and many are busy preparing plans for implementing this policy.

A problem has arisen with the island's South Lighthouse, which is its largest building, in so far as the keepers who now occupy it will cease to do so once it is automated. Decisions about its future should take account of the island community, since it could either be of immense benefit or cause of disputes, depending on the use to which it is put. The opinion of the inhabitants and of the National Trust should be taken into consideration before any decision is made: ideally the building should become National Trust property.

Fishing is not practised by the islanders. It would be difficult under present conditions, since large quantities of lobster are taken by boats from the Orkneys, where the species has become rare on account of over-fishing. Before the United Kingdom joined the European Community, a three-mile zone around the island was reserved for the inhabitants. Those waters are now subject to European rules, and any boat can enter them. As a result, fish stocks are dwindling and there are difficulties for small-scale fishing. This is an issue that warrants special attention.

6.2 Threats to the natural environment

In our previous report we mentioned the problem caused by fishing for sand eels (*Ammodytes marinus*). Intensive fishing was blamed at the time, and this has serious consequences for the seabird community. The situation reached the point in 1989 where fishing had to stop in summer: stocks were so low that the economic result was negative. Following this stoppage, the bird colonies revived and their numbers increased.

Fishing is no longer authorised now, but that is not the end of the matter as fishermen are pressing for the ban to be lifted. An inquiry is in progress and it is hoped that the arguments against fishing will win out.

7. Repercussions of the award of the European Diploma

One of the recommendations made by the Council of Europe in its 1985 and 1990 resolutions was that a breakwater be constructed for the island. This sizeable structure has now been completed, as well as a small harbour which has considerably eased liaison with Shetland islands. No damage was caused to the flora and fauna, or to the island's landscape. All building materials were imported from Norway.

Research into aspects of the changing plant cover (Recommendation No.2) is continuing. The spread of *Pteridium* and of *Juniperus* and the phenomenon of cliff edge erosion are being monitored, and it is hoped that this activity will continue in the years ahead.

Acting on Recommendation No.3 of the Council of Europe, the island community represented by one member of each family voted unanimously in June 1990 to safeguard Fair Isle's marine environment. The National Trust for Scotland commissioned N Riddiford to prepare a document entitled Fair Isle's Marine Environment, a Fragile Eco-system; assessment and recommendations to safeguard it. The author highlights the important relationship between the Marine environment (approximately 5 km) and the island's biological richness and cultural interest. He gives precise information on the problem of the sand eel and a detailed evaluation of the criteria for protection and the possibilities offered. A number of appropriate measures are recommended: one is that a three-mile fishing zone be established for the islanders' use only; another is that oil tankers be prohibited from coming within 10 km of the island's shores.

The subject of Recommendation No.4 is the existence of an active population: this is a fundamental aim of National Trust Policy and of the island's management plans - a point made earlier in this report.

The museum has been restored and is open to all the visitors to Fair Isle who may also take part in guided tours of the island. This condition too, may be regarded as having been fulfilled.

As to the last of the recommendations made in 1990 (rehabilitation of the typical features of the cultural heritage), some remarkable progress has been made: the Auld Haa has been completely restored and has even won the prize of the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland. The house is now inhabited and plays its role the community's economic life by providing Bed and Breakfast accommodation. In February 1990, preparatory research work for the restoration of Shirva Mill was completed, and one of the walls has since been repaired; it looks as though the restoration scheme can now go ahead. Only the lighthouses have remained unchanged.

C. Conclusions and recommendations

In view of the fact that conditions on Fair Isle have not deteriorated, but have actually improved, the conclusion of this report is that the renewal of the European Diploma for a period of 5 years may be wholeheartedly advocated.

We think the following recommendations would be appropriate:

1. Improved conservation of the marine environment.

Consideration should be given to the possibility of applying the 10-mile Voluntary Exclusion Zone for tankers as in the case of the remainder of the Shetland islands and setting aside a three-mile zone for the islanders' sole use, in which fishing should be limited to selective, non-mechanical methods. The ban on sand eel fishing should be maintained.

2. Cultural Heritage

The rehabilitation of items of the cultural heritage should continue, including the water mills, other archaeological sites and the lighthouses. The building adjoining the South Lighthouse should become an integral part of the island's socio-economic life.

3. Housing

The improvement of housing conditions and infrastructures should be continued with the assistance of the NTS and the Fair Isle Housing Committee. Priority should be given to improving sewage treatment and (possibly by means of a "green filter") and the disposal of bulky waste (old cars and machines).

4. Management

In general terms, it must be said that the present management plan is very constructive and its rapid implementation should be encouraged. The "prescriptions" set out in section 5 of the plan seem very appropriate and their application is strongly recommended.

D. REFERENCES AND DOCUMENTATION

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Drymond, N J, 1991 : The birds of Fair Isle Edinburgh 148 pages.
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS

RESOLUTION (90) 9

ON THE RENEWAL OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA AWARDED TO THE FAIR ISLE NATIONAL SCENIC AREA (UNITED KINGDOM)

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 18 June 1990
at the 442nd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)*

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma;

Having regard to Resolution (85) 14 on the award of the European Diploma to the Fair Isle National Scenic Area;

Having regard to the proposals of the Steering Committee for the Conservation and Management of the Environment and Natural Habitats (CDPE),

Renews until 21 September 1995 the European Diploma, category C, awarded to the Fair Isle National Scenic Area;

Addresses the following recommendations to the authorities which are responsible for the management of the site:

1. a breakwater should be constructed, once an impact study has been carried out with a view to minimising damage to the landscape and to the island's terrestrial and marine flora and fauna, in order to ensure a permanent link with the main island of the Shetlands;
2. research into aspects of the changing plant cover, particularly the spread of bracken, the signs of overgrazing and the abundance of *Juniperus nana*, should be intensified;
3. protection should be reinforced and extended to the seas around the island, if possible through the creation of a total marine reserve, and there should be scientific study of the development of the sand-eel population near the island;
4. the continued existence of an active population on the island should be guaranteed, by ensuring that there are economic activities which are compatible with respect for the natural environment and by developing housing which is in keeping with the beauty of the landscape;
5. the educational role of the area should be developed, with the help of an activity leader; the natural environment section of the museum should be developed if possible, particularly on the subject of the interrelationship between the island and the marine environment;
6. the typical features of the cultural heritage, such as the water-mills, the Auld Haa and the lighthouses and associated buildings, should be restored and rehabilitated.

APPENDIX II

Draft Resolution (95) ...

ON THE RENEWAL OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA AWARDED TO
THE FAIR ISLE SCENIC AREA (UNITED KINGDOM)

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma;

Having regard to Resolution (85) 14 on the award of the European Diploma to the Fair Isle National Scenic Area;

Having regard to the proposals of the Steering Committee for the Conservation and Management of the Environment and Natural Habitats (CDPE),

Renews until 21 September 2000 the European Diploma, category C, awarded to the Fair Isle National Scenic Area;

Attaches the following recommendations to the renewal:

1. Every effort should be made to improve the conservation of the marine environment. The authorities responsible for management should explore the possibility of prohibiting tankers from coming within 10 miles of Fair Isle's coast. (Application of the Voluntary Exclusion Zone already in force for the remainder of the Shetland Islands);
2. A three-mile zone should be set aside for the islanders' exclusive use, and only selective, non-mechanical fishing methods authorised therein;
3. The ban on sand eel (*ammodytes marinus*) fishing should be maintained;
4. The work of rehabilitating such items of the cultural heritage as the water mills, archaeological sites and lighthouses should continue;
5. Improvements to housing and infrastructures should be maintained; special attention should be given to sewage treatment and the disposal of the bulky waste;
6. Arrangements should be made for implementing the management plan approved by the Council of the National Trust for Scotland in April 1993.