

# Tides of time



JAEGER-LECOULTRE

The St. Kilda National Nature Reserve, an archipelago 100 miles (160 kilometers) from mainland Scotland, is an important breeding ground for seabirds

People lived on these isolated and rugged islands for 5,000 years, until being evacuated in 1930.

**PEOPLE** | Richard Luxmoore, senior nature conservation adviser for the National Trust for Scotland

## Emptied of human habitation 80 years ago, St. Kilda is now a seabird haven

More than 10,000 miles separate St. Kilda, Scotland, from Antarctica, but the two locations have more in common than may first be apparent. It is their similarities — remoteness, rugged terrain, indigenous wildlife and challenging climatic conditions — that fascinate Richard Luxmoore, a British marine ecologist who has worked in both places.

Luxmoore is senior nature conservation adviser for the National Trust for Scotland, which owns and manages the country's major nature conservation sites, including roughly 400 islands. Of all of them, none is more outstanding than St. Kilda, in his view.

"St. Kilda is an isolated archipelago in the middle of the ocean with really tremendous cliffs, some of the highest in Europe," he says. "But it's also outstanding for its wildlife. It has the largest seabird colony in Europe, with over a million seabirds in the breeding season."

Luxmoore's love affair with what he calls "wild places" and the sea began as a boy. He studied applied biology at Cambridge, then earned a Ph.D. in marine ecology while working for the British Antarctic Survey. He

came to work in Scotland in 1981 as a manager at a commercial fish farm in Inverness-shire, then joined the World Conservation Monitoring Centre in 1983 to gather and analyze data on international trade in wildlife. His focus later shifted to managing a global database of threatened habitats and protected areas.

In 1986, St. Kilda became Scotland's first World Heritage site, based on the striking beauty of its islands — with high cliffs and glaciated landscapes formed by ancient volcanoes — and its outstanding wildlife.

In 2003, the National Trust for Scotland helped submit a proposal to extend this World Heritage site to encompass its marine and cultural elements as well as its terrestrial heritage.

The marine environment is integral to the maintenance of terrestrial biodiversity, because it provides food for the breeding seabirds, including species such as Atlantic puffins and northern gannets.

Luxmoore joined the National Trust for Scotland in 1998, in part for the opportunity "to get involved with the management of St. Kilda." Working in Antarctica, he says, "gave me a love for wild places and small islands in the middle of oceans covered in seabirds. And I've always been interested in marine ecology as well. You get all of those in spades at St. Kilda."

He was heavily involved in the extension effort. In 2004, World Heritage status was extended to the islands' marine environment. A year later, St. Kilda was recognized for its importance as a cultural landscape. Luxmoore notes that there are only 45 marine World Heritage sites globally, and only 25 with both natural and cultural heritage status.

St. Kilda is the only such site in the United Kingdom and, he says, "really up there with the top few in the world."

The islands' cultural heritage bears witness to more than 5,000 years of human survival in extremely trying conditions. Although the last few residents were evacu-

ated more than 80 years ago, traces of human habitation can still be found all over the main island, including an abandoned village and 1,430 *cleits*, stone structures built without mortar that were used for storage.

"St. Kilda, like a lot of the west of Scotland, has very high rainfall," Luxmoore explains. "And consequently, you can't just leave things outside to dry; they won't dry, they'll just get wetter and wetter. So St. Kildans developed this technology for drying things, which we call *cleits*. They are basically dry-stone barns with a roof on but which let the wind blow through the walls. They would use them for drying hay, for drying peat for burning and for drying seabird carcasses for the storage over the winter."

The seabirds were critical for the survival of the St. Kildans. "There was a well-rehearsed cycle of harvesting the different species of seabirds at different times of year," says Luxmoore. The fact that this harvest persisted for millennia, he points out, "shows that these techniques for harvesting seabirds must have been sustainable." C.F.

### About World Heritage

The aim of the World Heritage Convention, adopted by UNESCO members in 1972, is "to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding universal value to humanity." "Tides of Time" is a partnership among Jaeger-LeCoultre, Unesco's World Heritage Centre and the International Herald Tribune. The series presents some of the people who are helping preserve marine sites on the World Heritage List. To see videos about World Heritage marine sites, visit the "Tides of Time" archive at [whc.unesco.org/tidesoftime](http://whc.unesco.org/tidesoftime)

### A privileged look inside a Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso

For some watch connoisseurs, it is not enough to own and wear an object of beauty such as a Jaeger-LeCoultre timepiece; they want to understand how it functions.

In London on Nov. 10-12, they had that opportunity. For the first time ever, 70 aficionados experienced the essence of the Vallée de Joux, birthplace of fine Swiss watchmaking and home to the manufacture, as Jaeger-LeCoultre organized a master class at the Salon QP watch fair at the Saatchi Gallery. This was a unique experience to learn from two master watchmakers, one who came from the Vallée de Joux especially for the event and the other based at the brand's boutique on Old Bond Street.

Interest was so keen that applications for attendance began arriving before the class had formally been announced. Most attendees were Jaeger-LeCoultre collectors and fans, but admission

was open to all members of Jaeger-LeCoultre's LeClub (applications can be found at [www.jaeger-lecoultre.com/leclub](http://www.jaeger-lecoultre.com/leclub)).

The attending V.I.P.s and watch specialists delved into the know-how of fine watchmaking. They learned how to assemble and disassemble the Reverso Grande Date Calibre 875, one of Jaeger-LeCoultre most famous movements. This particular model was chosen because it is the manufacturer's iconic watch, celebrating its 80th anniversary this year.

The "apprentices" were taught how to assemble the watch's mainspring, responsible for powering the train wheels, right down to the escapement, the device that literally makes the watch tick.

One participant commented: "Assembling and disassembling a movement helped demonstrate the sheer complexity of what goes on inside the watch. I've never seen such small parts!" C.F.

**ST. KILDA NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE** | Islands at the end of the world

## Remoteness helps keep 'spectacular' archipelago wild

Often called the End of the World or Britain's Loneliest Isles, the St. Kilda archipelago lies about 40 miles (60 kilometers) northwest of the Outer Hebrides, a solitary landfall in the North Atlantic that bears witness to both nature's fury and mankind's determination to survive in even the harshest of settings.

Says Richard Luxmoore, senior nature conservation adviser for the National Trust for Scotland: "It's mainly outstanding in terms of its landscape — an isolated archipelago in the middle of the ocean with some really spectacular cliffs. It's a really important site for its wildlife, particularly the seabirds. But it's also a fascinating and emotive place to visit for its human history."

St. Kilda's great irony is that while people survived on these islands for several thousand years on the barest essentials, they could not outlast the 20th century and all of its modern conveniences. In 1930, their number down to just 37, the remaining islanders petitioned the British government to assist their evacuation.

That's not to say that humans haven't left their mark on the tiny isles. Archaeologic-

al remains suggest habitation for 5,000 years. The landscape is speckled with old stone houses, field systems and the islands' distinctive *cleits*, small stone structures with earth and turf roofs used to store birds, eggs, feathers, crops, peat and other resources.

"It's sort of an echo of the way people lived in the past," says Luxmoore. "They lived a very — in some respects — pleasant existence, but in other respects a very tough existence. And it was the toughness of that life there that caused them to ask to be evacuated."

While the human side of St. Kilda still intrigues, the main draw for visitors to the remote islands today is the spectacular nature. As the ring-shaped remains of a Tertiary-era volcano, the islands boast some of the highest sea cliffs in Europe. Two geological wonders — Stac an Armin and Stac Lee — are the highest sea stacks in the British Isles. Stac an Armin is 191 meters high and Stac Lee 165 meters (627 feet and 541 feet).

Inhabiting these cliffs and other parts of the islands are more than a million birds — puffins and gannets, fulmars and petrels, kittiwakes and the indigenous St. Kilda wren.

St. Kilda is the single largest seabird breeding ground in the northeast Atlantic.

Despite its remoteness, St. Kilda and its seabirds are not unaffected by the outside world. One worry is the increasing use of damaging fishing techniques like scallop dredging in nearby waters. Luxmoore and others involved in St. Kilda's protection are looking at ways to stop this from taking place within the boundaries of World Heritage sites.

"But really the biggest threat to the islands is climate change," says Luxmoore. "And we're seeing some really dramatic changes in the seabird numbers, probably as a result of climate change."

The biggest concern is the kittiwakes, whose numbers have declined by close to 75 percent over the past 25 years. "It's a bit difficult to be absolutely categorical about it,"

says Luxmoore, "but certainly in other parts of Scotland the decline in kittiwake numbers has been tagged very closely to climate change and the impact that has on their main food, which is a little species of fish called the sand eel."

Tourism remains far down the list of environmental threats. Only a handful of people make it out to St. Kilda each year, and they're usually the type of visitors who have great reverence for both the human and natural heritage.

"We're very happy for tourists to come here," says Luxmoore, "but I think it's always going to be limited by the remoteness of the islands and, in particular, the rough sea conditions. There's a real sense of achievement having got there. That's one of the biggest attractions of the site." J.R.Y.

**Tides of time: St. Kilda National Nature Reserve** was produced by the IHT Creative Solutions department and did not involve the newspaper's reporting or editorial departments. It is the 31st in a series on Unesco's World Heritage marine sites. The next installment, about the West Norwegian fjords Geirangerfjord and Nærøyfjord, will be published Jan. 16. Text by CLAUDIA FLISI and JOSEPH R. YOGERST. For information on the IHT Creative Solutions program: [www.nytimesglobal.com](http://www.nytimesglobal.com)



JAEGER-LECOULTRE



THERE ARE STORIES THAT DESERVE TO BE CAPTURED FOREVER.