

NOMINATION TO THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage

Name: ST. KILDA

Identification No: 387

Date received by WH Secretariat: 31.12.85

Contracting State Party having submitted the nomination of the property in accordance with the Convention: UNITED KINGDOM

Summary prepared by IUCN (April 1986) based on the original nomination submitted by the United Kingdom. This original and all documents presented in support of this nomination will be available for consultation at the meetings of the Bureau and the Committee.

1. LOCATION:

Lies on the Atlantic continental shelf, 64km west of North Uist, Outer Hebrides and 160km from mainland Invernesshire, Scotland. 57°49'N, 8°34'W. National grid reference NF 095995.

2. JURIDICAL DATA:

Owned by the National Trust for Scotland and declared inalienable by the Council of the Trust. The whole archipelago is designated as a National Scenic Area by the Secretary of State for Scotland. The property is leased to the Nature Conservancy Council who in 1957 under Section 16 of the National Parks and Countryside Act declared it a National Nature Reserve. It is also notified as a site of Special Scientific Interest under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. A substantial part of the main island of Hirta is scheduled as an Ancient Monument and the area was designated a biosphere reserve in 1976.

The NCC subleased a 3ha part of Hirta to the Ministry of Defence in 1957 for the construction of a small radar station for surveillance of a nearby missile range. This is still in operation but is controlled by very strict lease agreements.

3. IDENTIFICATION:

The St. Kilda archipelago comprises the four islands of Hirta, Dun, Soay and Boreray plus the sea stacks of Stac an Armin, Stac Lee and Levenish. Total area 853ha. The Biosphere Reserve area covers 842ha.

The archipelago consists of the remains of a Tertiary ring volcano, weathered and glaciated to produce dramatic, extremely precipitous cliffs rising vertically to 430m. These are the highest and most spectacular sea cliffs in Europe cut in gabbro, granophyre, dolerite and basalt. Three islands (Hirta, Soay and Boreray) are over 370m high with the main island of Hirta rising steeply from Village Bay to the hill of Conachair (430m).

Habitats include dwarf shrub heath, dwarf shrub moss tundra, low bog, meadow and freshwater marsh. Over 130 species of flowering plants have been recorded from the island group. There are no trees present, but pollen analysis indicates that the islands possessed a partial cover of birch hazel scrub during the period 5200-6400BP. There is little intertidal vegetation due to the extreme exposure of the island group. The sub-littoral zone supports dense forests of kelp.

As an island group St Kilda provides an example of ecological isolation of small populations with genetic divergence shown by endemic populations of the St Kilda wood mouse and the St Kilda wren. The estimated sea-bird breeding populations form one of the largest concentrations in the North Atlantic. This comprises the world's largest colony of gannets (52,000 pairs in 1969, some 25% of the North Atlantic population), a large colony of fulmar (30,000 pairs) and some 50% of the British population of puffins. This species was formerly estimated at 2-3 million pairs but numbers have dropped substantially and have stabilized at 300,000 pairs. The islands are also one of the very few European breeding sites of the Leach's petrel. The feral Soay sheep represent an ancient breed descendent of the most primitive domestic forms found in Europe.

The islands have a wealth of archaeological remains including evidence of Bronze Age occupation and Viking visits. The islands are believed to have been more or less continuously occupied for approximately 2000 years with human habitation concentrated at Village Bay and Gleann Mor. For the last 800 years the islands were owned by Scottish clans. The inhabitants harvested seabird colonies and grazed up to 2000 sheep. After a series of outside influences including religious missionaries, a devastating outbreak of smallpox and tourism, the islands were evacuated in 1930.

4. STATE OF PRESERVATION/CONSERVATION:

The site is managed as a National Nature Reserve. A Nature Reserve Management Plan, prepared by the NCC is now under revision. The wildlife has been protected and undisturbed since 1930 and in general active intervention is not required to conserve the site's values. The vegetation of Hirta, Soay and Boreray is grazed but Dun is not. The few hectares previously cultivated in Village Bay have now reverted to grassland. The activities of the Ministry of Defence installation are strictly controlled. The National Trust for Scotland organizes volunteer work parties who carry out restoration work on the village ruins. Starting in 1958, some five cottages, the church, school house, many cleits and walls have been rebuilt and the drains cleared. The 3 ha occupied by the MOD has a local effect as have small peat cuttings and derelict cultivation. Access by visitors is restricted by lack of communication and landings (between May-June) are controlled by the warden.

A seasonal warden is present during April to mid-September. Financial resources are received from the UK Government and the NT for Scotland.

5. JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST:

The St. Kilda nomination, as presented by the Government of the UK provides the following justification for designation as a World Heritage property:

- a) Cultural property. Criteria being examined by ICOMOS.
- b) Natural property
 - (i) Earth's evolutionary history. St. Kilda provides an example of remote island ecological colonization and development in isolation, with genetic divergence shown by endemic populations of St. Kilda mouse and St. Kilda wren.

- (iii) Superlative natural features. The scenery of the archipelago displays its tertiary volcanic origin, weathered and glaciated to produce dramatic profiles. The three larger islands contain the highest sea-cliffs in Europe and these present stark, black, precipitous faces plunging from steep grass-green slopes in excess of 375 m (1,200 ft) above the sea. Scenically, every element appears vertical and the caves and stacs are a feature of every coast except the smooth amphitheatre of Village Bay on Hirta.
- (iv) Habitats of rare and endangered species. The islands contain impressive sea-bird colonies containing the highest populations in Europe, of over 1,000,000 birds. These include: Gannet, 25% of North Atlantic population; Puffin, 50% of British population (300,000 pairs). The archipelago possesses two isolated populations of one of the most primitive domesticated sheep in existence, living in a feral condition.

WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION -- IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION387 ST. KILDA (UNITED KINGDOM)1. DOCUMENTATION:

- (i) IUCN Data Sheets
- (ii) Consultations: J. Foster, D. Poore, H. Corrie (WWF-UK), D. Minns (RSPB), S. Gubbay (Marine Conservation Society), J. Sayer
- (iii) Literature Consulted: Nature Conservation in North and West Europe (IUCN, 1980); National Parks and Reserves of Western Europe (E. Duffey)
- (iv) Site visit: June 5, 1986

2. COMPARISON WITH OTHER AREAS

Within the Scottish Highlands Biogeographic Province there are 20 protected areas on the UN List (IUCN, 1985). Six of these (Hermaness, Loch Druidberg, Noss, North Rona, Monach Isles and Rhum) are islands off the coast of Scotland but none have the seabird concentrations or scenic values as St. Kilda. The Faroe (Denmark) and Lofoten (Norway) island groups have larger total numbers of seabirds but do not have the diversity of species evident on St. Kilda. These latter islands also do not have protected area status. There are three national parks and two nature reserves in the Svalbard Islands (Norway) but these are arctic/glacial landscapes not comparable with St. Kilda.

No other island in the North Atlantic/North Sea thus has such spectacular or high sea cliffs as St. Kilda. The relatively compact grouping of the four islands and their attendant sea stacs is not found elsewhere. St. Kilda has the largest gannetry in the northern hemisphere (and perhaps the world) with a quarter of the world's population nesting there. The wave-exposed maritime grassland turf habitat is another feature of St. Kilda that contributes to its uniqueness.

3. INTEGRITY

Ownership of the islands by the National Trust and the lease to the Nature Conservancy Council of Scotland coupled with strong planning powers imposed by designation as a National Scenic Area, are effective safeguards against land use activities which would be opposed to the interest of conservation.

The presence of the Ministry of Defence on the main island of Hirta and the operation of a radar tracking station on a three hectare lease has resulted in significant modifications in the Village Bay area. Installations at two locations at the summit of Hirta have resulted in negative visual impacts and expansion of these is a possibility. The MOD has, however, provided both a quasi-protection function and a support service for research and administration. Vandalism by visiting fishermen during the Second World War when the islands were unoccupied is now negligible.

The islands themselves are currently not under any threat to their integrity except through accidental oil spills. However, although the breeding sites of the seabird species are protected, their feeding areas are not. The marine environment around the islands is not managed for nature conservation and with growing awareness of the underwater marine scenery and wildlife, the islands are becoming increasingly popular with SCUBA divers. Some action to give protection to the marine life in the adjacent waters of St. Kilda using existing marine nature reserve legislation appears merited.

4. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Except for the omission of the important features of the marine environment the nomination also presents cultural justifications for consideration. These are being evaluated by ICOMOS but in any case are considered secondary to the natural values which predominate on St. Kilda.

It is evident from the bibliography that scientific studies of the archipelago natural features have been extensive and have contributed significantly to man's understanding of island ecosystems.

5. EVALUATION

St. Kilda has two natural attractions which are of outstanding value and which merit its inclusion on the World Heritage list under criteria (iii) and (iv). These are:

- a) The scenery of the St. Kilda archipelago is particularly superlative and has resulted from its volcanic origin followed by weathering and glaciation to produce a dramatic island landscape. The precipitous cliffs and sea stacks as well as its underwater scenery are concentrated in a compact group that is singularly unique.
- b) St. Kilda is one of the major sites in the North Atlantic and Europe for sea birds with over one million birds using the island. It is particularly important for gannets, puffins and fulmars. The maritime grassland turf and the underwater habitats are also significant and an integral element of the total island setting. The feral Soay sheep are also an interesting rare breed of potential genetic resource significance.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

St. Kilda Archipelago should be added to the World Heritage List. The importance of the marine element and the possibility of considering marine reserve status for the immediate feeding areas should be brought to the attention of the Government of the UK. The Committee should also request to be kept informed of any further expansion of military facilities on the island of Hirta.



J Thorsell

