

**Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta/Creative Islanders**

Project commissioned by HI~Arts

**Còmhradh nan Eileanach Ealanta/  
Creative Islanders Conference 2005**

**consultant's report**

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## **Còmhradh nan Eileanach Ealanta/Creative Islanders Conference 2005**

### **Easdale Island, 19 and 20 August 2005**

#### Background

**Creative Islanders/Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta** is a project initiated by HI~Arts following an in-depth study of cultural activity in the islands of the Hebrides (2002)<sup>1</sup>. The main findings of this study supported the formation of a network of arts activists across the Hebrides as a first step towards better arts provision that is sensitive and responsive to the cultural priorities of island communities. At the initial gathering of contributors on the Isle of Skye in September 2004, Còmhradh nan Eileanach Ealanta/Creative Islanders Conference indeed confirmed the need for, and value of, a dedicated project which can support island arts initiatives. This call was reiterated on Easdale Island in August this year, where representatives of eleven Hebridean islands gathered to discuss possibilities and support each other's creative work.

From the outset, **Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta/Creative Islanders** has developed in an unconventional way. The original study was conducted through one-to-one interviews more familiar to folklorists than artists. Since the findings were published online in 2003, **Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta – Creative Islanders: culture and creativity in the Hebrides** continues to offer a useful overview for newcomers to the project. There were several reasons for eschewing familiar arts research paths; for me the most compelling ones were that the islands of the Hebrides, despite real physical isolation, continue to foster a deep respect for all things Gaelic and to provide safe harbour for artists of every discipline. These two facts alone suggest a richness of



**Còmhradh Choisich, Easdale 2005**

lived experience that nourishes arts and culture. The heart of the project to date is a great conversation or *Còmhradh* about culture, the arts and the islands – their historical, linguistic and creative importance for the entire country, but particularly for islanders themselves. My goal at each stage of

the project has been to highlight and bolster that nourishing factor, so that HI~Arts

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<sup>1</sup> Read the report at [http://www.hi-arts.co.uk/Na\\_hEileanaich\\_Ealanta\\_Creative\\_Islanders.htm](http://www.hi-arts.co.uk/Na_hEileanaich_Ealanta_Creative_Islanders.htm)

and other leading providers for this huge geographical area can build supportive mechanisms for the arts activists of the Hebrides.

The more I have visited and learned from Hebridean islanders, the clearer I am that fresh, flexible ways of working are called for if we are to support their arts activity. My development work in 2005 has confirmed these sentiments. The islands of Argyll are more culturally diverse, less accessible to each other and continue to lack basic services (such as libraries, local transport and banks), that Outer Isles residents can now take for granted. These small communities survive on creativity: We don't need to show them what to do. What we do need is to meet them at least half-way. Arts agencies and providers must look afresh at the potential, rather than the challenges, of supporting arts activity at local level in the Hebrides. It would be all too easy to engineer yet another series of top-down arts projects that owe little to local interest and even less to a shared Hebridean sense of cultural identity, which is now beginning to re-emerge. This shared cultural sense can be bolstered and nurtured by agencies such as HI~Arts, which has an islands-wide remit – but not by sending in ‘the experts.’ Instead the consistent call has been for supportive funds and structures that enable local activists to communicate, travel and collaborate with each other, a call which HI~Arts has admirably responded to this year by setting up the **Hebrides Go and Meet Fund**<sup>2</sup>.

The nature of the meetings generated through this fund will undoubtedly bear long-term fruit, but of course there is also a real need for immediate results. This project has been running for three years; the 2002 recommendations for fresh ways of working are taking some time to deliver. Now that gatherings of contributors to the study have taken place on Skye and on Easdale islands, Creative Islanders/Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta can move forward as an initiative with clarity of purpose.

From north and south the message has been the same:

- Yes, we believe in the value of a Hebridean-wide arts and culture initiative.
- Yes, we want to see a dedicated post or posts to deliver results.
- No, we don't have time to make it happen ourselves. *“Don't ask us back in a year's time to ask our opinion, without some real development and investment”* the meeting on Easdale told us at the end of a very enjoyable and constructive day.

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<sup>2</sup> GO&Meet established August 2005 by HI~Arts with a fund of £3,000. An adaptation of its name has been called for, see report recommendations below

This last call pinched a nerve, yet I am certain that it was less a criticism and more a recognition of the large gap between mainland arts practice and island realities. This gap causes frustration and misunderstandings that I hope this project can address. Participants in these gatherings have spoken with clarity of their commitment to Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta/ Creative Islanders and trust that HI~Arts and HIE can listen and respond. Of course, there will always be some difference between users' expectations and agencies' resources. Yet there is a definite opportunity to bolster arts and cultural activity across the Hebrides in the lead-up to 2007 that it would be most unwise to bypass<sup>3</sup>. There is also a need for trust in long-term arts and cultural development that the project can and should meet.

### Na Còmhradh/The Gatherings

The gatherings have taken a similar shape in both places. Folk arrive on Friday night, share a meal and socialise over drinks in our venue. Saturday is devoted to workshops that seek to address particular islands concerns. At Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on Skye (2004) the set-up was very straightforward. We were able to accommodate everyone on campus and could theoretically function without reference to our locality, although the support of local arts organisation SEALL was invaluable.



**Puffer Bar. Easdale Island**

### Easdale 2005

On Easdale Island, however, it simply isn't possible to isolate oneself from the everyday activities of the place or its people. This brought Hebridean issues into sharp focus and greatly informed the weekend discussions. It wasn't feasible to accommodate all twenty two participants on the island and so Oban became our HQ, with a minibus transporting the group to and from the Easdale ferry. There were lots of good conversations *en route*. Weekend highlights were the moonlit ferry crossing to Ellenabeich on Friday night and the walking workshop/*Còmhradh Choisich* right round and up to the island's highest point after lunch on Saturday. As you might imagine, the informal meetings were many and varied. These connections are all set to develop, since most islanders genuinely want to share ideas and experiences,

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<sup>3</sup> While 'Highland 2007' will concentrate only on Highland Region, HIE is committed to supporting cultural initiatives across the Highlands and Islands up to that year and beyond.

particularly through arts and cultural activity. Còmhradh nan Eileanach Ealanta/Creative Islanders Conference is unique in that it has brought together representatives of no less than sixteen Hebridean islands in total (eleven islands this year on Easdale). While the gatherings have been relatively small in conference terms, the breadth of experience has been as vast as the geographical spread of the Hebrides themselves. This in itself is an important achievement. Of course it is also a costly exercise: I would urge HIE, HI~Arts, SAC and local agencies<sup>4</sup> to continue to fully fund these annual gatherings. They form crucial steps towards empowering island arts activists in the long-term and will reap rewards for all concerned. Arts and cultural administrators need access to this pool of information and opinion almost as much as islanders do. Both conferences have agreed that an annual gathering of Creative Islanders is vital to the success of the project and that these should always be on a Hebridean island. I can't think of any better way to focus our attention on the unique issues around arts and culture in the islands.



Visiting Fiona Blakey's new studio, Easdale

### An Còmhradh Fhèin/The Conference Itself

Taking the findings of the 2004 Còmhradh on Skye as a starting point, the priority was to find a mechanism that would allow participants to again make connections with each other, but this time with a clearer structure and purpose. Resistance to setting up a steering group on Skye had made it difficult for HI~Arts to move the project forward last year. However, this reluctance also led us to reappraise HI~Arts' expectations of the project. How do we deliver to remote communities without placing the burden of unwanted new committees on already overstretched volunteers? My development work had highlighted the urgency of this question particularly in Argyll, where island populations are small and resources often meagre.

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<sup>4</sup> Còmhradh na nEileanach Ealanta/Creative Islanders Conference 2005 was funded by Scottish Arts Council and Argyll and Islands Enterprise and fully underwritten by HI~Arts and HIE.

We felt strongly that a project-oriented model would make far more sense in the Hebrides and give the clarity of purpose we needed to achieve for Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta/Creative Islanders.

As an ice-breaker, four groups brainstormed ideas for an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration for Creative Islanders, which would fall in 2020. The intention here was to instil a sense of confidence in the project and in the cultural life of the islands from the outset. Fun,



colourful responses to this theme included beautiful boats, silent free helicopters to transport us about, birthday cakes in the shape of every island and lots of parties, of course. While we expected the celebration to have a worldwide profile via the web and cable communications, all felt that this should be a celebration for islanders, first and foremost. Of course there is no reason why this should exclude emigrants. On all Hebridean islands links to the wider world are strong and valuable, most notably

put to use by Ceòlas on South Uist where musicians and dancers from Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia whose ancestors emigrated from the island, travel yearly to tutor at the summer school in July. On a more practical note, only one group flagged up the hope that by 2020 we would have high-speed ferries connecting all islands to each other as well as the mainland. Perhaps this was a realistic take, but from an observer's view it was a poignant reminder of just how fragile and under-funded Inner Hebridean islands infrastructure in particular continues to be.

Next, the groups took project suggestions that have continued to come up regularly. Four good ideas had been kicking around from the outset; it was time to work them up as Hebridean-wide projects that could really happen, and soon. The groups were asked to come up with a five year implementation plan, using a production team model rather than a more traditional committee structure. This would give us at least two strong projects to run with, we hoped. In fact, the day's endeavours showed that all have the makings of valuable, exciting and realistic Hebridean projects.

- **Dorsan Fosgailte:Hebrides GO&Meet**

The Go & Meet Fund has now been established and so this workshop was playful and mildly unrealistic in its ambitions. The group was definite that private charter boats would need to play a major role in getting folk around the islands. Given the current

funds allocated for Go & Meet this will be difficult to achieve. There was a call to include the wider Hebridean diaspora, which of course would eventually lead to a world-wide project. (Not on any Scottish arts budget, we fear!) As a title, **Dorsan Fosgailte** (Open Doors) is still popular because it suggests a way forward that is home-based, not tourist-led and financially realistic. Inspiration and learning were key words that should inform the aims of **GO&Meet** and the Gàidhlig language should be at the heart of its activities. The nucleus would be a group of about 10 islanders with different arts/craft skills – artists, musicians, storytellers who would begin travelling inter-island to bring: *Inspiration* (year one); *Inspiration and Learning* (year two); *Networking people* (year three) and *Celebration* (year five). This plan could be repeated every five years for 25 years, by which time Ireland, Shetland and Orkney would be conquered as Hebridean colonies (sorry, Creative Islands!)



On-island gatherings should focus on a Taigh Cèilidh. This is a model that we worked up on Skye (2004), based loosely on the French *terroir*. Its essence is a locally owned and run cultural house on every island – not a large unwelcoming hall, but an intimate building devoted to cultural activity and more akin to the true sense of a cèilidh or visit.

- **Dè tha ‘dol Innse Ghall/Hebrides Arts Diary**

The possibility of an arts diary was suggested by HI~Arts in the initial study. It was broadly welcomed as an idea, with the reservation that someone, somewhere would need to work to make it happen. It could then become a powerful tool for connecting and enhancing Hebridean links.

*‘..look on ... this diary as a chance to be creative – make it unique, give it a wonderful design, think very creatively about how it would come together, what it would take. Design and create locally, use the talent we have’<sup>5</sup>*

It was agreed then that such a diary should be published bilingually in Gàidhlig and English. This year’s workshop also looked at the wider possibilities: E-newsletter, local radio slots, chatrooms and a dedicated space on the HI~Arts website. As a first step towards opening up the project, participants in the Easdale event should feed a

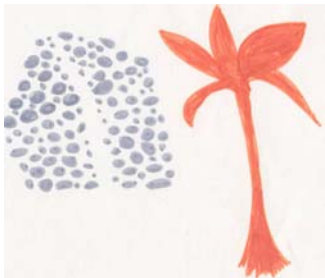
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<sup>5</sup> Quote by Kevin MacNeil, writer, who now lives on Lewis. Original report 2002.

short piece into their local island newsletters describing the project and pointing islanders towards the HI~Arts website information<sup>6</sup>. Some young Fèisean nan Gàidheal members in the Oban area can also do a piece on local radio this autumn. A more dedicated project will demand a co-ordinator or editor, however and a team of contributors Hebrides-wide. The diary would support events across the spectrum, providing information for local people and visitors alike.

- **Hebrides Sculpture Trail**

At the 2004 Còmhradh, Norman Macleod of Taigh Chearsabhagh, North Uist, proposed a sculpture trail as a perfect Hebridean-wide project. His inspiration is Nordland, in the remote north-west of Norway where a world-class sculpture project recently came into existence with the full co-operation of local communities. Since then another excellent model, the North Mayo Sculpture Trail,<sup>7</sup> has come to our



attention. Taigh Chearsabhagh has already built up an impressive sculpture trail across the Uists and Benbecula; the arts centre is therefore in a perfect position to guide the groundwork for this plan. The workshop group was excited – this one is realistic, and we can do it for 2007. The proposal is to work with the four Hebridean arts

centres, Commainn Eachdraidh /Historical Societies and islands bodies such as the Nàdair Trust<sup>8</sup> that work across the islands. The form the trail takes will begin by gathering information on sites ancient and modern (these would include standing stones, archaeological sites, gravestones and war monuments as well as modern sculptures). A guide to these sites, with photographs and information about artists where known, could be compiled and made available through local information centres and on the web. While this network of sites is coming together, Creative Islanders would seek to commission a range of *new*



works for 2007 which would all draw on and commemorate or celebrate local

<sup>6</sup> Mary Schmoller, South Uist, took up this idea immediately and has been published in ‘An Uisteach’

<sup>7</sup> North Mayo Sculpture Trail, a millennium project incorporating ancient and newly commissioned works and highlighting local flora and fauna

<sup>8</sup> The Nàdair Trust is a small charity that currently manages 38 Heritage Lottery funded projects in the Argyll islands

histories, stories and traditions (the exemplar being Will MacLean's crofting memorials). Linking artists with local communities in a meaningful way will be crucial to the success of these artworks. By commissioning artists to work within islands communities the Trail can bring art into the very centre of island life. By connecting up historical and modern sites, the Hebrides Sculpture Trail would prove popular with local people, visitors tracing their ancestry and general holidaymakers. The Trail would also ensure a high profile for visual arts and crafts throughout the islands during the year of Highland culture (2007).

- **Fèis nan Eileanach Ealanta/Creative Islanders Festival**

The festival idea proved the most difficult to take forward. What emerged strongly from this workshop was a recognition of the individuality of Hebridean islands in geographical terms alone and the unsuitability of a one-fits-all model for any travelling arts programme of events. Concerns about foisting a large festival idea on islands communities that already run many exciting events stalled the creative thinking in the early stages; as did ferries and midges, of course. Boats featured strongly in the group's potential solutions once more. The possibility of a festival

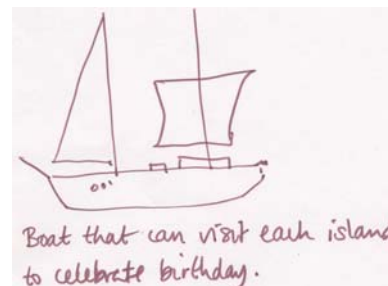


boat mooring by a bigger island and ferrying people over from smaller harbours won favour. Thinking of our location that day as a model, a large boat couldn't get to Easdale, but Easdale could get to a large boat – moored off Mull, for instance. Crucial to the success of this idea would be working with or extending *existing*

festivals and subsidising audience mobility. CNES<sup>9</sup> organises cheap buses to and from island festivals and fèis events and considers this essential to the success of such events.

### Ealain Mara/Arts and the Sea

The idea of arts boats also emerged in workshops last year on Skye, suggesting that they would have wide appeal for Hebrideans, as well as being a very strong tourist attraction. Every workshop on Easdale considered using boats to be an essential part of the way forward for the Hebrides. Suggestions included taking advantage of visiting cruise ships, which are increasingly appearing in island ports. This should



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<sup>9</sup> Comhairle nan Eilean Siar/Western Isles Council

remind us that the sea must be either a major obstacle to cultural links or a valuable friend. Many inspiring islanders already use boats in an exciting way – we need to build on their example and touch the lives of Hebrideans everywhere. Sea-based celebrations could really achieve that.

The rhythm of the day on Easdale was achieved by a blend of small workshops interspersed with spotlights on individual island arts activities and broader discussion on islands-wide issues that can often impede arts and cultural progress.

- **An Solas/The Spotlight**

The first spotlight fell on **Ceòlas** on South Uist. Mary Schmoller described the enormous pride local people have in this community-run adult fèis, which connects long-lost fellow-islanders now settled on Cape Breton Island with their place of origin. The Cape Bretoners have brought step dance and fiddling back home, which has led to year-round classes locally. Uisteachs, in turn, share their enormous treasure of Gàidhlig song, piping and language with participants in the week-long festival. Ceòlas has evolved into the most dynamic community-run fèis in the islands. Ceòlas has just produced a wholly island-made and designed DVD telling its own story.

Mike McKenzie from **Eilean Eisdeal Trust** on Easdale gave a short, inspiring and



**Easdale Island Hall**

unscripted talk about why the island trust, formed in 1997, considered it vital to throw all its considerable energy and resources into building the architecturally stunning hall we were meeting in. The Easdale Island Hall project, completed in 2003, attracted the largest ever lottery funds for a village hall.

In Mike's experience, people who choose to live or remain on islands are more alive to arts and culture. A degree of romanticism informs their decisions but there is a meaningful calculation at work also. For islanders to stay, we need social opportunities, affordable housing and economic opportunities. Arts and culture can and does contribute hugely to the social and economic survival of Easdale. The mind-opening quality or force of arts and culture is vital for the 21<sup>st</sup> century islander. A greater dialogue between culture and education is

much needed for the future wellbeing of our communities. The conversation Mike's wee spot stimulated carried on throughout the day.

From Islay, Stuart Todd introduced us to the odyssey that took a small island arts association, promoting a handful of mainland events each year, to develop the **Islay Jazz Festival**. The festival which uses small venues – including private houses across the island and at least one distillery - is now a fixture of the Scottish jazz calendar each September. Stuart himself is a huge jazz fan and was initially encouraged to discover that jazz concerts on Islay attracted roughly the same audience numbers as classical concerts, opera etc. However he insists that the breakthrough for the Islay Arts Association came when Assembly Music connected up with them and developed a plan for an island-wide event that harnessed the best of local talent and expertise with the skills of a professional arts organisation. The resulting festival continues to build in terms of profile, local involvement and audiences, with an impressive mix of international jazz styles and performers in a broad range of events every autumn.

- **An Còmhradh/ The Discussion**

Intrinsic to the workshop plan was the adoption of an organisational structure most commonly used in arts and the creative industries. Each group was asked to identify and allocate tasks roughly grouped under the headings *financial*, *technical*, *planning/producing* and *administration/marketing*. This was the result of many hours' discussion and soul-searching which stemmed from development work this summer. Once again, and in even sharper profile, the vexed issue of volunteer burnout and the unwillingness of young creative people to join committees shone out on every island. Part of this issue is the difficulty of bringing short-term development workers, however skilled and well-intentioned, into a small community. On bigger, well-connected islands such as the Uists and Benbecula these posts can prove useful, attracting local residents who can have some trust in finding a follow-on job. Yet in most instances, paying one individual to carry out tasks that most committee members have done voluntarily distorts a committee's effectiveness and can undermine valuable volunteers.

It is important that new projects don't insist on the formation of any more committees in order to deliver. In a less explicit way, this was the message from our gathering on Skye last year. Our Easdale think-tank reiterated the call. This means that a well-prepared, dedicated core team of paid workers will be required to implement Creative

Islanders/Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta – not a steering group. Those who have attended both meetings wish to be consulted as the project gathers pace. But there must be



Sunset over Easdale

core investment – someone who can have an overview needs to be employed to co-ordinate the project and islanders with specific expertise should be contracted to take on dedicated project tasks as required. While each of the four proposals that day was full of potential, none of them can happen without dedicated resources. Everyone

in attendance also favoured an annual gathering/còmhradh on a Hebridean island. Interim consultation could happen via email, telephone and on website chatrooms.

Such a distillation of islands arts expertise is hard to ignore. Committees are not the way ahead, we were told. Expecting volunteers to take the lead is unreasonable and probably unmanageable, given the distances and ambitions Creative Islanders/Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta has sought to nurture. There is a hunger for better ways to place arts and culture at the centre of islanders' lives and a consensus that they have an enormous contribution to make to the economic and social wellbeing of the Hebrides. With such an endorsement, I believe that HIE and HI~Arts should move forward swiftly by funding a long-term Creative Islanders/Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta project. The project can lead the way in addressing difficult issues as well as enabling ambitious ideas to reach fruition, and soon. The 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party can really happen; it can and should be a fabulous celebration of Hebridean life and culture. I look forward to it.

### Conclusion: Co-dhùnadh

My recommendations fall into two areas. In the first instance, it is time to allocate 5 year funding for Creative Islanders/Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta. The project requires a co-ordinator who is comfortable working in Gàidhlig and English if possible and can continue to nurture the informal links that are the hallmark of the project, with an eye on capacity building opportunities at every level. This will include assisting participants on Easdale to contribute to their local newsletters, radio etc., with information about the recent event and background about the project in general. Secondly work should begin now on three of the proposals we investigated last month – **Dè tha 'Dol Innse Ghall/Hebrides Arts Diary**, the **Hebrides Sculpture Trail** and

**Dorsan Fosgailte: Hebrides GO&Meet**, treating GO&Meet as a development project rather than simply as a fund.

## **Recommendations**

- That HIE and HI~Arts allocate **5 year funds** to firmly establish Creative Islanders/na h-Eileanaich Ealanta. This would comprise a co-ordinator post and dedicated project and consultation funds
- An annual **Còmhradh nan Eileanach Ealanta/Creative Islanders Conference** should continue as the main means of consultation for the project, taking place on a different island each year
- Creative Islanders/Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta should operate through the Gàidhlig and English languages and welcome any immigrant islanders as a source of cultural richness
- **Dè tha ‘Dol Innse Ghall/Hebrides Arts Diary** should begin soon in an email, bilingual version - possibly linking with, or learning from, the popular Scottish Islands Newsletter produced on Skye. The aim should be to also produce a printed, well-designed brochure by Spring/Summer 2007.
- **Dorsan Fosgailte:Hebrides GO&Meet** This fund requires increased resources and careful monitoring. Its title should be changed to the above, as requested on Easdale and during the development process this year. This project initiative should inform arts practice and build the links that are crucial to the success of Creative Islanders/Na h-Eileanaich Ealanta
- **Hebrides Sculpture Trail** should begin immediately. It is essential that one person or centre co-ordinates information and that a production team comes together to design and deliver the project. I recommend that Taigh Chearsabhagh and the Nàdair Trust are at its core, with islands arts centres, local islands historical societies and Hebridean arts enthusiasts contributing as appropriate.

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**September 2005 / An t-Sultainn 2005**

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