

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE UPLANDS - CUMBRIA

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The International Centre for the Uplands - Cumbria started work in April 2004. It comprises a unique and growing partnership of organisations, led by Lancaster University, which is responsible for assuring the excellence of the research and for promoting the interaction with local communities.

This article describes the genesis and development of the Centre, and its plans and aims for the future.

Genesis of the idea

The uplands sustain people's re-creation, in the fullest sense; physically, spiritually, and aesthetically. They inspire art, poetry, music, ideas, as well as the exhilaration of the physical challenge. The community and the economy are an essential part of the beauty, history and continuity that attract people to the uplands. That beauty must be sustained and accessible, which is in turn dependent upon land-based industries and other areas of the upland economy, many of which are currently in decline in Cumbria and elsewhere. These economic sectors can however be boosted by those who come to enjoy the landscape temporarily or permanently, as long as the will and the means can be developed to deliver a truly integrated and holistic vision of upland landscape, with all sectors and communities working effectively for mutual benefit.

The celebratory International Year of the Mountain in 2002 and the tragic Foot and Mouth Disease epidemic of 2001 both highlighted the importance of upland landscapes and their communities as important economic drivers, but equally left no-one in any doubt of their fragility. From this emerged the idea for an actual or virtual institution to increase understanding of the totality of threats and opportunities to Cumbria and other upland areas, so that we are better placed to use the invaluable resource of these

landscapes and their communities more wisely and thus to assure their sustainability.

A broad and diverse Steering Group was set up to further the concept of an International Centre for Sustainable Uplands - Cumbria, whose membership included Cumbria County Council, the Cumbria Inward Investment Agency, the Learning and Skills Council, Cumbria Tourist Board, the Lake District National Park Authority, Mountain Heritage Trust, the National Farmers' Union, the National Trust, the Northwest Development Agency, the University of Central Lancashire and the Wordsworth Trust. The Steering Group issued a prospectus and invitation to bid in November 2002, setting out the aims for an exciting and innovative development, without prescribing the form it should take.

"The upland landscape, and the communities, economies and traditions sustained by it are under threat. Not only in Cumbria, but also throughout the UK and Europe, upland communities with a rapidly changing agricultural sector at their heart, have become disconnected from the wider economic and social regeneration programmes, which are largely urban in focus. More research is needed and more high calibre thinking is required, with academic input at one end, and the application of new ideas at the other. In the past, the upland landscape has been a significant economic and cultural driver - through innovative thinking and the energetic development and pursuit of the ideas it generates it will become so again."¹ The prospectus went on to emphasise that the problems and opportunities facing Cumbria were shared with many other upland areas in the world, particularly within rural Europe, and that Cumbria could both learn from and share solutions with these areas. "In its compact area of varied habitats, communities, economic activities and land management systems, Cumbria offers an ideal place to focus thinking on the future of the international uplands; it offers a superb opportunity to develop an incubator for new ideas that will have international impact."²

¹ Cumbria County Council (2002), *Prospectus and invitation to bid: an International Centre for Sustainable Uplands - Cumbria*, Cumbria County Council, p.4.

² *ibid.*, p.4.

Making the idea a reality

Excited by the prospectus and confident in the range of expertise it could mobilise, staff at Lancaster University worked over several months with a wide range of local, regional, national, and international partners (listed at the end of this article), to develop and refine the proposal and business plan that were finally approved in principle by the Steering Group in May 2003. Particularly active in their development were the University of Central Lancashire (Cumbria Campus), Voluntary Action Cumbria, Mountain Heritage Trust, and the Banff Centre for Mountain Culture. Dr Gordon Clark, Senior Lecturer in the Geography Department at Lancaster, and Jacqueline Whiteside, Director of the Centre for North West Regional Studies, coordinated most of this activity, with the strong support of University senior management. Later that summer, funding was granted by Cumbria County Council, Rural Regeneration Cumbria supported by the Northwest Development Agency, and the Lake District National Park Authority, totalling over £736,000, to cover the core costs for the first three years.

An Implementation Group was formed to oversee the establishment of the Centre, comprising representatives of Lancaster University, University of Central Lancashire, Voluntary Action Cumbria, Cumbria County Council, Rural Regeneration Cumbria, and the Northwest Development Agency. Members of the Group were also closely involved in the critical appointment of its Director, Kit Nicholson, who took up post in April 2004, joining the staff of Lancaster University. The Centre's Coordinator (Dawn Corse) joined the Centre in June 2004, with a part-time Deputy Director (Ian Soane) and two Research Officers (Cathy Bailey and Helen Shaw) due to take up appointment in September 2004. The Centre is based physically in very attractively restored premises at Hackthorpe Hall Business Park near Penrith, Cumbria, and is supported by Lancaster University's financial, personnel, academic and administrative services.

How the International Centre for the Uplands - Cumbria will operate

The Upland Centre originates from a desire to assist upland areas and communities to move themselves forward to meet the challenges faced by the Cumbrian uplands (and other upland areas in the UK and abroad) in the context of environmental, social and economic changes. The aim is to complement the best practices already in the county with ideas and policies of proven worth developed in other parts of the UK or upland rural areas in Europe or North America, for example. The Centre will consult widely in Cumbria to determine the key areas where research should be carried out and then will contract with the individuals and institutions best placed to carry out the work to a clearly defined brief. The Centre's role is therefore to:

- define the Cumbrian upland research agenda (in consultation);
- convert this into a workable programme of research and consultancy projects;
- award research contracts to the best researchers after a competitive bidding process;
- oversee their work and ensure it meets the brief;
- disseminate the research findings in a form which is useful for practical application in Cumbria by public, private or voluntary agencies.

A useful model for the Centre's work is that of the thematic research programmes run by the UK research councils, but what differentiates this Centre is its commitment to working closely with the intended users of its findings and helping them apply the findings in their longer term planning.

The Centre will be responsible for high-quality practice-led research and the dissemination of the results, in order to improve the policies for and management of the uplands in Cumbria and beyond. The research will be international in its scope and quality, and will cover all aspects of upland areas (environmental, economic, social and cultural).

The Centre will run two Standing Conferences each year within the county. The purpose of these is to reach out to a countywide audience of individuals, communities, organisations and businesses to determine the broad priorities for the work programme. These events will draw in international speakers and so be showcase occasions for the county.

The Centre's work will be guided by a Steering Group comprising Cumbria County Council, Rural Regeneration Cumbria, Lake District National Park Authority, Northwest Development Agency, Lancaster University, University of Central Lancashire, Voluntary Action Cumbria and six or seven individual Cumbrians who can contribute to the Centre's work. The Steering Group will set the priorities and guide the work programme and budget. The work programme will be separately funded by the core funders and other agencies and groups in Cumbria to a possible value of £100,000 - £250,000 per year.

The longer-term future of the Centre will be determined by its success in its first three years. There is certainly a desire to see the Centre as a continuing feature of the Cumbrian upland scene once it has proved its ability to conduct international quality research 'which makes a difference'. The aim is for the Centre to become an internationally recognised centre of uplands excellence.

As part of Lancaster University, the Centre will have access to its many centres of excellence, such as the Lancaster Environment Centre, Infolab21 (leading edge ICT work), the Management School, the Institute for Health Research, the Ruskin and Wordsworth Programmes, and the developing Institute for Advanced Study in Management and Social Sciences, and it will draw on the expertise developed over 30 years of the Centre for North West Regional Studies. The University of Central Lancashire, particularly through its campus at Newton Rigg near Penrith, provides a focus of expertise in agriculture, forestry, leisure and land management which will be very useful for the Centre's work. Voluntary Action Cumbria brings extensive experience of the practicalities of facilitating integrated rural development on the ground, as well as strong local networks. St Martin's College has a proven track record of delivering within

and contributing to the sustainability of the community and economy of the upland region, especially from its Ambleside and Carlisle campuses. The Mountain Heritage Trust aims to preserve, celebrate and promote the history and heritage of mountaineering, and the valuable art and artefacts associated with mountain-based activity. Other local, national and international partners bring an unparalleled breadth and depth of expertise and experience, from the Banff Centre for Mountain Culture to Carlisle College, from the UHI Centre for Mountain Studies to the Federation of Cumbria Commoners.

Current and future activities

The work programme will only be established by the Steering Group once the first agenda-setting conference (to be held on 12th and 13th November 2004) has taken place. A series of possible research topics has however already been developed. Examples of possible areas for work that are likely to be included in the work programme are:

- The value of the arts to the uplands
- The economic importance of linkages between environment, the arts, and the rest of the economy
- Cumbrian travelling fellowships (outward and inward) for comparative studies across different uplands
- The impact of CAP reform proposals on the uplands
- How New Zealand manages landscapes without production subsidies
- Getting schoolchildren to make the most of the uplands
- The social value of hill farms
- Farm succession and the CGR
- Interior tourism in the Atlantic Fringe

As the Centre has such a wide-ranging and inter-disciplinary remit, a series of criteria has been developed to assist the Steering Group and Standing Conference to prioritise objectively the many opportunities, proposals, and approaches that the Centre will continue to attract. These include the requirement to produce clear benefits for residents and visitors to the Cumbrian uplands and elsewhere, the need for transferability of results, and

international involvement and applicability. It will undoubtedly be a challenge to maintain focus, given the diversity and the complexity of the issues to be addressed. For this reason, the Centre's innovative and participative ways of working will be fundamental to its success.

Working with the research programme, the Centre will also encourage and engage in activities that promote and celebrate the uplands.

The distinctiveness of the International Centre for the Uplands - Cumbria

The International Centre for the Uplands - Cumbria will bring together the local and the international, the practitioner and the academic. Local communities will be closely involved both in defining research priorities and in the research itself. Much applied research focuses on the short term, but the Upland Centre aims to become the driving force for identifying and delivering a *long-term vision* for upland Cumbria. It will adopt new ways of working in order to achieve the goal of realising and celebrating world-class upland communities. These will include: acting as catalyst for previously disparate groups to communicate and work together in different and positive ways in pursuit of agreed goals (e.g. urban and rural communities; traditional and new industries; landowners and tourist organisations); cutting through existing structural, cultural and administrative boundaries where these represent constraints on progress; reinvigorating the confidence and capabilities of local communities, making them the starting point for networking and research; and exploiting the benefits of leading edge (communications) technologies to ease dialogue and access new markets and opportunities. It will harness experience and academic expertise from across the world into a dynamic, independent body, which will in turn become a globally recognised source of ideas and solutions that have local, national and international impact.

The Centre's concept of a world-class upland community is one where:

- people cherish their culture and heritage and physical environment, whilst having confidence in their future and in that of the community as a whole
- businesses, both traditional and ground-breaking, thrive through best practice and innovation
- indicators of physical, mental and spiritual health are positive
- there are first-class communications and education/skills strategies in place
- people are open to new ideas and different perspectives

The Centre will act as a critical friend in monitoring the effectiveness of current policies, and driving and catalysing the development of new policies and strategies. These must be informed by, and rooted in, the experience and expertise of practitioners and communities, as well as high quality research. In summary, it aims to fulfil the message from Sir Chris Bonington in the original prospectus, "If we get it right, it will help realise the opportunities for the future. It will draw from international experiences and, at the same time, be an example to the rest of the world. In Cumbria we live in a World Class Landscape and we need to make more of it."³

Watch this space!

For further information about the International Centre for the Uplands - Cumbria, please contact:

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³ *ibid.*, p.2.

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International Centre for the Uplands - Cumbria

Partner organisations:

Lancaster University (lead institution)

University of Central Lancashire

Voluntary Action Cumbria

Banff Centre for Mountain Culture

Carlisle College

Centre for Development and Environment, Bern University

Centre for Ecology and Hydrology

Centre for Mountain Studies, UHI Millennium Institute

Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University

Federation of Cumbria Commoners

Fell and Rock Climbing Club

Institute for Grassland and Environmental Research

LANTRA

Mountain Heritage Trust

St Martin's College of Higher Education