World Heritage Site

St Kilda

a comparative analysis of the cultural landscape
The inhabitants of St Kilda are much happier than the generality of Mankind, being almost the only People in the World who feel the Sweetness of true Liberty. Martin Martin, 1697
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St Kilda Revised Nomination of for inclusion in the World Heritage Site List

Cover: Village Bay, Hirta – the hub of the cultural landscape
Introduction

To all who have been there, and many thousands who have not, St Kilda is an amazing place with a remarkable history. A spectacular natural landscape is the canvas upon which people have painted layer upon layer of evidence of their daily survival across the last five millennia.

But this was no ordinary existence. The tiny islands of St Kilda possess two particular qualities which make it appear to us, today, as one of the hardest places on earth where people have settled successfully:

• the islands are extremely wild, remote and isolated, and
• they bear only a handful of natural resources upon which people can survive.

With this combination of adversities, it is surprising to us that people would have wanted – or been able – to live there at all. Yet they did, and the landscape bears testimony to an unusually distinctive, self-reliant hunter/farmer way of life which developed and thrived for at least 5000 years.

The cultural landscape of St Kilda is therefore unique. There are no immediate parallels.

The special qualities of St Kilda:

1. * 5000 years of history
   * outstanding preservation
   * survival of a complete system
   * dramatic landscape setting

2. * Thriving subsistence based on birds
   * Iconic story of sustainability

3. * Divergent architecture and social system
   * Isolation from the mainstream

4. * Superbly documented social history
   * Outside influence and tourism leads to abandonment

… it is the combination of landscape and tenure in a difficult terrain which lifts scenery into cultural landscape.
St Kilda is currently inscribed on the World Heritage List on account of its outstanding terrestrial and marine natural heritage, and for its landscape value. In July 2004, the World Heritage Committee considered the proposal to extend the World Heritage status of St Kilda to include the cultural landscape that bears testimony to millennia of human endeavour. A decision was deferred at that meeting, and the Committee requested that the comparative analysis in the revised nomination should be enhanced and represented.

This document clarifies and amplifies the case put forward in the Revised Nomination of St Kilda, looking particularly at the special qualities that give St Kilda its outstanding universal values, and compares those qualities with other remote communities in the region and further afield. The comparative analysis is followed by Appendices, which consider how St Kilda fits into current thinking about World Heritage cultural landscapes. All relevant cultural heritage sections from the Revised Nomination have been compiled into an accompanying document, which gives further detail of the background to the islands’ history and management.
a. Country
United Kingdom

b. State, Province or Region
Western Isles, Scotland

St Kilda (Hirta)

1 Wendy Price Cartographic Services, Inverness, 2002. Map based on the 1928 Ordnance Survey map with additions from aerial photography kindly supplied by Photosea through Scottish Natural Heritage. Whilst every care has been taken to ensure that the map is correct, it should not be used in a situation where a high degree of detail is required.
2 St Kilda – a cultural landscape of World Heritage value

2.1 Existing ICOMOS recommendations

In June 2004, following receipt of the Revised Nomination of St Kilda and an evaluation visit in 2003, ICOMOS recommended inscription of the islands on the following cultural criteria:

‘Criterion iii: St Kilda bears exceptional testimony to over two millennia of human occupation in extreme conditions.

Criterion v: The cultural landscape of St Kilda is an outstanding example of land use resulting from a type of subsistence economy based on the products of birds, cultivating land and keeping sheep. The cultural landscape reflects age-old traditions and land uses, which have become vulnerable to change particularly after the departure of the islanders.’

This reinforced an earlier ICOMOS recommendation in 1986, in response to the initial nomination document, where they concluded that ‘the St Kilda archipelago corresponds perfectly to the definition of a cultural and natural property…’:

‘The tiny St Kilda archipelago in the Hebrides Island is not only one of the biggest sanctuaries of wildlife and marine life in the North Atlantic, but also bears testimony to a coherent ecosystem which has remained virtually unchanged over 2,000 years of human occupation.

From the Bronze Age to the evacuation of the archipelago’s last inhabitants in 1930, the islands of Soay, Hirta, and Boreray, and the islets bordering their coasts have undergone several periods of human occupation. At several sites there is evidence of a Christian influence prior to the Viking invasion, as illustrated by numerous artefacts from the 10th century. Difficult to date, the conserved structures – cairns, circular stone formations, groups of monastic cells and even post-medieval villages – illustrate a remarkable persistence of forms of primitive architecture in a country whose traditional modes of construction have survived to the contemporary period.’

‘Cleit at the end of the world’
2.2 What makes St Kilda one of the most special places in the world?

The Revised Nomination of St Kilda includes the following Statement of Significance, upon which this enhanced comparative analysis is based:

A unique combination of special qualities work together to give St Kilda its universal cultural value. Most important of these qualities are:

- the completeness of fossilised 19th-century settlement and agricultural remains
- the spectacular landscape setting adapted by people through the millennia
- the perceived remoteness of the islands
- the vivid story of human endeavour – evidence of millennia of sustainable use, largely based on the use of bird resources, followed by declining viability, principally due to external influences – on small islands in an extreme climate
- and the wealth of documentary evidence from the 17th century to the time of abandonment, which provides the means to appreciate and understand the other main qualities

continued...

To have one or two of these qualities is special, but to have all is truly unique, resulting in the iconic status of St Kilda in the international consciousness.

The almost tangible spirit of the place comes from the imprint left after the eventual demise, largely the result of outside influences, of this way of life after several thousand years. The twin aspects of people’s resilience in inhospitable surroundings, and the contrasting precarious traditional ways of life in the face of inexorable social and economic development give the place its emotive power. St Kilda is unique, not only in that so much of the physical evidence of its past culture has survived, embraced by the spectacular natural landscape, but that this is complemented by detailed documentary accounts stretching back 400 years and more.

St Kilda is at once stunningly dramatic and acutely isolated. Its remoteness is accentuated because it is and always has been difficult to access. There is a romantic perception of its position as the islands ‘at the edge of the world’, where the people lived in harmony with nature. The steep cliffs and pounding seas around the archipelago give a sense of the overwhelming power of nature, against which the very visible remains of human activity fills visitors with awe and respect for past inhabitants. But perceptions of St Kilda remain clouded by those of 19th-century travellers who were seeking experiences of the sublime, and whose writing tended to ignore those things that contradicted their expectations.

Revised Nomination of St Kilda for inclusion in the World Heritage Site List (2003, 12)

The dense distribution of cleitean and bothies on all the islands and large sea stacs of the archipelago reveals how the St Kildans utilised every part of the landscape – part of the remarkable legacy of built structures
2.3 St Kilda’s outstanding universal value

To be recognised as a cultural landscape worthy of World Heritage Site status, a place must demonstrate ‘outstanding universal value’. For St Kilda this is undoubtedly the case:

The ‘universal value’ of St Kilda is as an exceptionally well-preserved and documented example of how, even in the most extreme conditions of storm-swept remoteness and very few obvious natural resources, people have been able to live in harmony with nature for millennia. The St Kildans led a distinctive social and economic way of life, in response to the peculiar physical and geographic setting of the islands.

However, increasing external influences from the 19th century onwards brought aspirations and expectations that eventually made the way of life no longer sustainable – leading to the evacuation of the islands in 1930.

St Kilda is of ‘outstanding value’ in this context because of:

- the time-depth, preservation and completeness of the physical remains of a whole human system that reflects a distinctive geo-cultural census;
- the remarkable documentary evidence of society and traditions that puts flesh on the bones of the archaeological ruins; and
- the dramatic landscape to which this cultural wealth integrally contributes, and which has helped give St Kilda its iconic status.

Review of cultural significance: the landscape setting

The dramatic landscape setting, the subject of hundreds of published photographs, is one of the key assets of the cultural landscape of St Kilda. On the largest island, Hirta, the sheer scale of the hills within which the settlements seem to fit perfectly is remarkable. On Boreray, the steepness of the slopes on which prehistoric settlement and later historic summer bothies are set is awe-inspiring. While Stac an Armin, with its cleitean and bothy surrounded by the raucous calling of tens of thousands of gannets, is breathtaking. And these are just some of the landscapes that make up the archipelago that is St Kilda.

No relict prehistoric and historic landscape can rival St Kilda in this respect, and the cultural landscape unquestionably contributes to the aesthetic appeal of the landscape, which is already recognised in St Kilda’s World Heritage inscription under natural criterion iii.

Village Bay, Hirta: the village, with its street, houses, enclosures, cleitean and fields, is the best preserved system of its type. But the village only marks the end of a long history of human occupation, evidence of which survives extensively throughout the landscape.
The following checklist (Phillips 1995, 390) of items for evaluation of cultural landscapes for World Heritage status is useful for highlighting the match with St Kilda:

**Landscapes as a resource**
The landscape should be a resource of world importance in terms of rarity and representativeness

**Scenic quality**
The landscape should be of the highest scenic quality, with pleasing or dramatic patterns and combinations of landscape features, and important aesthetic or intangible qualities

**Unspoilt character**
The landscape within the area should be unspoilt by large scale, visually intrusive or polluting industrial or urban development or infrastructure

**Sense of place**
The landscape should have a distinctive and common character, including topographic and visual unity

**Harmony with Nature**
The landscape should demonstrate an outstanding example of a harmonious interaction between people and Nature, based upon sustainable land-use practices, thereby maintaining a diversity of species and ecosystems

**Cultural resources**
The landscape should contain buildings and other structures of great historical and architectural interest; the integrity of these features should be apparent

**Consensus**
There should be a consensus among professional and public opinion as to the world importance of the area; reflected, for example, through associations with writings and paintings about the landscapes which are of international renown.

*NOTE: A further consideration of St Kilda in the context of more recent guidelines from ICOMOS and IUCN can be found in Appendix C.*
Continuity then change: the St Kilda story

As well as looking at other aspects of cultural significance, the comparative analysis must look at the environmental, economic and social context of St Kilda. The diagrams on the following pages illustrate the effects of the St Kildans changing from what human ecologists call ‘ecosystem people’ to ‘biosphere people’: the story of how the social and economic system worked on St Kilda while it was a largely closed system, then how, particularly from the mid-19th century when external influence increased, significant changes were brought about and the balance with nature was lost.

3.1 Ecosystem people (Diagram 1, p.14)

For most of the five millennia of human occupation of St Kilda the inhabitants seem to have had relatively little contact with the outside world – even with the Western Isles of Scotland. We know from travellers’ accounts that by the 18th century the St Kildans had a divergent system of social organisation. This was much more egalitarian than elsewhere, with a reliance on group decisions and a fair system of sharing the fruits of communal labour, which fitted in well with the shared run-rig system of temporary land allotment. This had presumably been in existence for several centuries, and may have developed in medieval or even earlier times.

With a population of around 20 times what might be expected from the 30 hectares of cultivable land, the people had clearly mastered their environmental conditions; they appear to have thrived and been relatively stable. Crop yields were said to be good, and tens of thousands of seabirds taken from the cliffs each year meant that there was never a shortage of bird meat, feathers and oil – indeed more than enough to provide a very substantial rent to the distant landlord and his agents during the medieval and post-medieval periods. The food system was heavily reliant on a few key food sources, especially gathering eggs and hunting seabirds, catching sheep, milking cows, and the production of arable crops based on heavy manuring and large-scale redistribution of soil. The almost total lack of wood for building led to a divergent building style, and especially the unique and distinctive, ubiquitous cleitean – over 1400 loosely-built stone stores designed to allow produce to dry in this very damp but very windy place. Social divergence is evident in some of the songs and poems, in the place-names and folklore, and in traditions linked to the landscape.

All this took place within a system with relatively little interaction with the outside world, with an economy based on barter and exchange through the landlord’s agent rather than money, and, very significantly, with no reliable opportunities for trading.

This system is described in literature going back 400 years or more, and has left a wealth of standing and buried evidence, some in an outstanding state of preservation – even by the very high standards of the Western Isles of Scotland.

3.2 Biosphere people (Diagram 2, p.15)

From around 1830 the whole nature of St Kilda changed forever. The reorganisation of the informal cluster of huts on Hirta into the carefully set out street of more refined blackhouses was accompanied by the allocation of areas of arable land to specific families – perhaps the first nail in the coffin of the communal way of life that was previously enjoyed.

A further nail in the coffin was the appeal of foreign lands. Individuals had always travelled across the seas. But in 1852 a third of the population of St Kilda chose to emigrate to Australia. This left a gaping hole in the life-support
In a concerted bid for Presbyterian conformity across Scotland, the austere doctrine of an evangelical Christian church led to a sharp and deliberate decline in oral traditions of ancient songs, poetry and folklore. The landscape, once alive with stories and music, became an austere environment, and the church became the absolute focus for the islanders’ spirituality. Were it not for the earlier writings of visitors, little or nothing would have survived of the oral tradition of the St Kildans.

System, which continued to haemorrhage, person by person, over the succeeding decades. By the early 1900s there were no longer enough people to sustain a viable community: this ultimately led to the evacuation of the islands at the islanders’ request on 29 August 1930.

From the 1830s onwards the tourist interest in St Kilda grew, with people keen to see at first hand the ‘noble savages’ on their doorstep. This opened a new channel in the trade of tweed and other products – providing money to pay the rent and purchase goods from the mainland. This may have led to less reliance being placed on the birds and more interest in the money economy of the mainland.

Efforts to improve crop yields by using bird viscera and by-products to fertilise the fields eventually led to an unintentional but dangerous build-up of contaminants in the soil around the village, leading to reduced yields and potentially harmful transmission of poisons into the food chain.

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The restructuring of the village street in 1860 brought the latest house types from mainland Scotland and relegated the traditional blackhouses to become byres or barns. Even now, however, the lack of a ready supply of timber meant that the tradition of cleit building survived.

Noble savages:
Anthropologists have shown that indigenous groups often process culturally encoded mores that result in preservation of the resource base. But these documented patterns are sustainable only under conditions of low population density, abundant land, and limited involvement with a market economy. (McNeely and Keeton 1995, 32)

Early 20th-century cruising itinerary: tourism had come early to St Kilda. People were fascinated to see such a ‘primitive’ way of life on their doorstep. But the St Kildans played their part – as ‘noble savages’ – for the visitors, often demanding payment for their efforts.

The ‘noble savage’ impression of the islanders was marketed as one of the main attractions to tourists.
St Kilda World Heritage Site

a comparative analysis of the cultural landscape

Ecosystem People

SIGINIFCANT REMOTENESS

Localised oral tradition and mythology

Divergent building styles

Hunter-farmer economy
Heavy reliance on few key food sources

Divergent culture and social organisation

Relative population stability

Lack of tourist interest

Lack of trading opportunities

Sustainable use of key resources

FEW NATURAL RESOURCES

Economic/Environmental Influences

Social Influences

Little external social interest

Lack of external social interest
Loss of local oral tradition and mythology

Convergent building styles

Farming/trading economy
Decreasing reliance on few key food sources

Convergent culture and social organisation

Population instability

Less sustainable use of key resources

Widening trading opportunities

Significant tourist interest

Significant external social interest

Money economy

WIDE AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES

LESS PERCEIVED REMOTENESS

SociaL Influences

Economic/Environmental Influences
The historical development of the archipelago is described in detail in the *Revised Nomination Document*, but it is helpful to draw together some of the key dates in the islands’ story. Many of the prehistoric and early historic dates are approximate, and their refinement awaits modern scientific dating and further archaeological research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3000 BC</td>
<td>Earliest evidence for human occupation, including evidence of agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000 BC</td>
<td>Bronze Age burials&lt;br&gt;‘Scattered about...were green mounds called gnocan sithichean...the abode of the fairies...In a few of them bones were found, and in nearly all of them pieces of earthen vessel.’ (MacKenzie 1911, 6-7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 BC</td>
<td>Iron Age settlement; Amazon’s House built?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 BC</td>
<td>Iron Age settlement; souterrain (underground structure) in use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 200</td>
<td>Iron Age structure near screes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 700</td>
<td>Early Christian, possibly monastic activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 900</td>
<td>Viking-period visitors or settlers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1100</td>
<td>Norse seamen populate the landscape with names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1200</td>
<td>Reference to ‘Hirtir’ in an Icelandic saga</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Then the north-east wind blew and they were driven south into the open sea. And they found they were at Sudreyjar [The Hebrides] and they recognised them, and they have come to the islands that are called Hirtir…’ (extract from Prests saga Gudmundr Goda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1500</td>
<td>Pre-1830s survivor – Calum Mor’s house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1527</td>
<td>First description of the islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘The last and outmaist Ile is namit Hirtha….This Ile is circulit on every syd with roche craggis; and na baitis may land at it but allanerly at ane place….Sum time thair micht na pepill pas to this Ile bot extreme dangeir of thair livis….’(Boece, 1527)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1697</td>
<td>Martin Martin’s quasi-ethnographic visit and account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1727</td>
<td>Smallpox decimates population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1830s</td>
<td>Restructuring of the Hirta village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1860s</td>
<td>Rebuilding of the houses on the village street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1930</td>
<td>29 August: St Kilda abandoned at request of islanders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1957</td>
<td>Islands bequeathed to The National Trust for Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1986</td>
<td>Islands inscribed on World Heritage List</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The essentials of a comparative analysis

5.1 General characteristics of World Heritage cultural landscapes

Guidance from the World Heritage Centre (WHC 2001, Para. 2.3) makes clear that a comparative analysis should relate the property to comparable places, and indicate:

1. Why it is more worthy for inscription on the World Heritage List or, for those already inscribed;
2. What features distinguish this property from existing World Heritage Sites;
3. Whether it is intrinsically better, or possessed of more features;
4. If it is better preserved or a more complete survival; or
5. If it has been less prejudiced by later developments.

All of these aspects will be considered in the following analysis.

St Kilda does not fit into well-defined categories of cultural landscape like formal gardens and pleasure grounds, or landscapes associated with wine making or growing rice. However, a recent review of World Heritage cultural landscapes (Fowler 2003, 51), published by the World Heritage Centre, has been helpful in identifying a number of generic attributes (in bold text) which are particularly relevant to St Kilda:

‘World Heritage cultural landscapes have now begun to define themselves collectively. They are characterised

• Geographically/topographically/functionally by: mountains, water, farming and inhabited settlements including towns;

• Intellectually by: historical and/or cultural significance, continuity and tradition, religiosity and aesthetics.’

The characteristics of St Kilda clearly match extremely well with other cultural landscapes that have already been identified as being of worthy of inscription to the World Heritage List, and the level of preservation, documentation and understanding of the way people lived serve to raise St Kilda above most other places in the world.
The following comparative analysis begins with those places nearest to St Kilda in terms of proximity and cultural background. The analysis then looks at places further afield, on the western seaboard of Ireland, and on the north-west fringes of Europe – Norway, the Faeroe Islands, and beyond. The analysis goes even further afield to look internationally at very remote places with minimal natural resources but which have nevertheless sustained human settlement.

5.2 Principal characteristics of the St Kilda cultural landscape

Before comparing and contrasting St Kilda with other places, it is useful to set out the criteria which will be used for comparative purposes. The characteristics which give St Kilda its outstanding universal value and, in combination, make it unique can be summarised as:

• The time-depth locked within the landscape, representing the occupation of the tiny archipelago over at least five millennia;
• The quality, intensity and completeness of the surviving archaeological and landscape evidence – at system rather than just site level – of this very long occupation and human use of the resources available to them;
• Humanity’s survival in very extreme conditions such as the small number of food sources, the inaccessibility of the islands, the harshness of climate and the lack of timber resources;
• The reliance for survival principally on the exploitation of birds, contrasting with the comparative lack of use of marine resources;
• The careful use of natural resources, exemplified by the survival of the Soay sheep which have themselves become a ‘living artefact’ and an internationally important gene pool;
• The exceptionally good physical evidence for St Kilda’s assimilation to a more standard pattern of settlement and contact in the 19th century;
• Outstanding levels of documentation from the 17th century onwards both of the ‘indigenous’ life style and of the assimilation into the mainstream, and eventual abandonment;
• The distinctive social systems and architectural styles consequent upon this isolation;
• St Kilda’s isolation and consequent reliance on a subsistence economy with few trading links up until the 19th century;
• The dramatic landscape setting, to which the cultural landscape features are integral;
• The story of abandonment, precipitated by tourism and other external influences, resulting in St Kilda’s iconic status to people from around the world.

A cultural landscape is a place where people and Nature have interacted, not just impacted, and the results of that interaction give the landscape in view its particular character. Cultural landscape links past and future.’ (Fowler 2004, 123)
The Scottish Highlands and Islands context

St Kilda is one of many island archipelagos in the Highlands of Scotland, but while there are various similarities between these relatively remote outposts of human habitation, the combination of special qualities found on St Kilda make it unique.

The first impression of the island of Hirta is one of an amazing density of stone buildings – houses, blackhouses, cleitean, dykes, planticrubs and enclosures. Nowhere else in the Highlands of Scotland is there such an overwhelming presence of constructions from an age past.

Within the most recent settlement area on Hirta, the linear village is characterised by more than 20 blackhouses dating to the 1830s, alternating with 16 houses from the 1860s. The building of these homes in two distinct, short phases and without the large-scale destruction of the earlier constructions is unique to St Kilda. None of these buildings has been enlarged in plan, and no additional structures have been added to the street since the 1860s. This, too, is unparalleled in Highland Scotland.

Across Hirta, Soay, Boreray and Stac an Armin are many hundreds of cleitean – the uniquely constructed stone storage structures which formed a key feature that ensured a food-supply chain for those living on St Kilda for millennia. These structures are unique to St Kilda. Nowhere else are there so many stone storehouses associated with so few homes. Nowhere else do same-function structures exhibit such a variety of shapes, sizes and layouts within such a small geographical area. Nowhere else have stone storehouses amongst regularly-used hunting/gathering grounds proved necessary.

On the north side of Hirta, in Gleann Mor, is a landscape associated with the management of sheep and cattle, overlying a prehistoric landscape of settlement and agricultural use. The form of the features associated with the post-medieval and medieval stock control is unmatched in the Highlands of Scotland. Grazing management elsewhere is characterised by simple shielings (summer grazing areas) in compact groups. In Gleann Mor, however, the 16 complexes of stone ‘enclosures’, cellular structures and larger underlying prehistoric constructs scattered across the landscape have no parallels.

Medieval or later rural settlement survives notoriously poorly in the Highlands of Scotland, not least because most structures were built of turf and wood. This was not the case on St Kilda, where stone was the main building material. One structure of this period has survived in its entirety on Hirta – Calum Mor’s House – which is therefore of outstanding significance. It is known that well-preserved remains of similar structures survive elsewhere on the island, buried beneath the turf. It is much more usual for the older evidence to have been swept away by demolition and subsequent reconstruction on exactly the same place, or for agricultural activity to have destroyed all traces of what went before.

On Boreray, Soay, Dun and Hirta there is a complexity of prehistoric sites and areas that defy the later notion of a population cut off from the world at large. The survival of such a time-depth is not unusual in the Highlands of Scotland. What is unusual is that it survives as an integral part of a comparatively small area of land which has been so intensively used over the millennia.

The late medieval and post-medieval cultural identity of St Kilda is characterised by an amazing wealth of documentary records. For such a tiny community, this is unique in the archives of Highland Scottish material. Authors describe the egalitarian nature of the society – not paralleled elsewhere in the Highlands and islands – as well as the specific traditions associated with the way of life on the archipelago, particularly relating to the taking of birds from the incredible cliffs and sea stacs.
The importance of the seabird harvest to the people of St Kilda was greater than those of any other island in the Scottish Highlands. This characteristic underpins the uniqueness of the cultural landscape of St Kilda, which spans land, cliffs, and sea.

In a material sense, we wish to compare St Kilda to its neighbours in terms of the level of survival, time-depth and readability of the tangible features of the landscape. In terms of the way of life, we need to compare and contrast the agricultural system that produced the cultural landscape, and also the social organisation that governed the islanders’ daily existence. We also need to look at how that existence was affected by the remoteness and relative lack of contact with the outside world.

6.1 The Outer Hebrides context – Scotland’s Western Isles

The Outer Hebrides are covered with archaeological sites of all periods, many surviving extremely well although often buried under peat or sand. But as a cultural landscape the islands as a whole do not exhibit a great coherency of survival or preservation through time, unlike the St Kilda archipelago which boasts an incredible density of evidence from all periods, often with exceptional levels of survival – both above and below ground.

In addition, the Outer Hebrides do not have a history of dependence on a particular food-supply chain. Everywhere in the Outer Hebrides is reliant on fishing and small-scale farming, but only on St Kilda was there such a dependence on seabirds – their eggs, meat, oil and feathers.

While the medieval and later tenurial system of the St Kilda archipelago was the same as that on the Outer Hebrides, socially there were significant differences. These were manifest in the ‘St Kilda Parliament’, where the work of the day would be decided by the menfolk, and also in terms of the equitable division of the fruits of the day’s communal labours. Such differences were arguably necessary or even vital to the sustainability and survival of this relatively large community living off the bounty offered by the archipelago: the secret of their success in the face of adversity.
Therefore, the magnificent survival and preservation of archaeological and historic structures; the importance of the dependence on the seabirds for food and rent; and the development of a specific social structure all mean that St Kilda stands apart from other places in the Outer Hebrides.

6.2 Mingulay – ‘The near St Kilda’

The island of Mingulay, towards the southern tip of the Western Isles, is sometimes referred to as ‘the near St Kilda’, and in a few ways this comparison is justified. Like St Kilda, Mingulay was evacuated in the first part of the 20th century (1911) when the few remaining islanders were resettled. The comparison with St Kilda is also in part due to the relative remoteness of Mingulay – not in terms of distance from other places, but because of the unreliability of the landing place and the dangerous seas and currents. Even today, like St Kilda, no matter what transport is being used, travellers will only be sure of getting there when their feet touch dry land.

Mingulay village – entombed in sand: The village on Mingulay survives extremely well, in part because many of the huddle of blackhouse shells have been inundated with sand – sometimes to wall-head height. However, it bears no comparison.
with the village on Hirta which is a complete survival of an 1830s and then 1860s planned settlement with its directly associated fields and storehouses, enclosures and planticrubs.

Ancient beginnings: As with many islands in the Scottish Highlands, recent archaeological survey has revealed a number of significant remains of prehistoric and later date. But the remains on Mingulay appear only to constitute fragments of the former land-use system, and do not have the clarity and readability of those spread across Hirta. The rigs of an intensive agricultural system have destroyed the prehistoric fields that must have existed around individual sites, as they still do in Gleann Mor on the north-west side of Hirta.

Fishing, fowling and farming: Like St Kilda, fowling was a specific activity in the lives and economy of the Mingulay islanders, and the cliffs continue to be home to large populations of seabirds. However, fishing formed a much larger part of the Mingulay economy, as, although still dangerous, the waters around Mingulay are less treacherous than those further out into the Atlantic Ocean. St Kilda is acknowledged as the archipelago of seabird hunting.

In comparing the special qualities of Mingulay with St Kilda, we find that St Kilda excels because:

- historic and prehistoric structures across the cultural landscape on St Kilda are possessed of more features, and they survive better and are far more complete than those on Mingulay; and
- the tradition of seabird hunting, with its associated structures, folklore and oral traditions, was far more important and more developed on St Kilda than that on Mingulay.

6.3 North Rona – ‘The distant isle’

Although much smaller in scale (only 120ha in extent and 107m at the highest point), with much less spectacular topography, the island of North Rona bears some similarities to St Kilda. Just as remote, and with a certain amount of fowling undertaken, the small community on North Rona lived in a tiny cluster of three houses of pre-19th-century origin – on a site with Early Christian remains. Largely abandoned by the late 18th century, the island has none of the density of structures, extensive evidence for storage, or complexity of time-depth that makes St Kilda so important.

Corbelled stone structures on North Rona and Hirta: with an almost complete absence of wood for building, stone-based construction techniques were similar on both islands
### 6.4 Auchindrain township

The Highland township of Auchindrain is probably the most intact surviving example of an 18th to 19th-century small nucleated village in Scotland. It has a good resource of documentary and oral accounts of daily life, and has been an open-air museum since 1975. The village is unusual, like the settlement on Hirta, in that it was bypassed by the Highland Clearances, and the buildings remained almost unchanged in outward layout thereafter. However, the township is situated in a small Highland glen that has seen major road improvements and forestry developments, which have significantly changed its context.

Auchindrain therefore completely lacks the isolation of St Kilda and the pattern of buildings is unstructured, in contrast with the cohesion of the 19th-century village on Hirta, although both places share a remarkable degree of intactness. But Auchindrain’s associated hinterland of fields and other resources is nowhere near so well preserved as that spread over St Kilda, and hunting formed an almost insignificant part in Auchindrain’s very different agricultural economy.

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**Highland linear settlements**

The village of Morefield in Ross-shire is a good example of a linear rural settlement created at the time of the Improvements of rural Highland Scotland. The village plan is easily interpreted from the mid-19th-century map, but on the ground the houses and plots have been radically altered since originally being set out. This contrasts strongly with the cultural landscape of the St Kilda archipelago, with its prehistoric landscape and sites, and its historic structures and settlements, still surviving, even after the new village was laid out on Hirta in the 1830s and redeveloped in the 1860s.
6.5 Review of the Hebridean and Highland Scottish context

St Kilda has certain key qualities that are to be found in many other places in Highland Scotland, highlighted in the examples listed above, but nowhere are all of the qualities exhibited in the one place, except on the St Kilda archipelago. Because of its extreme exposure to the North Atlantic, its isolation and remoteness, and the development of its unique cultural traditions, St Kilda cannot be likened to any other Scottish site:

• The level of physical survival of features in the landscape of the archipelago is exceptional and our level of understanding of the society and their way of life through documentary sources is unsurpassed.

• The village on Hirta is without doubt the most complete and least altered site of its type in Highland Scotland.

• Nowhere else can be found that comes close to the ingenuity and sustainability of the St Kildans in their long-term relationship with the land and the seabirds.

The impression that people from elsewhere had of the ‘primitive’ St Kildans provoked two almost opposing viewpoints. For those from nearby islands, the St Kildans were often seen as dirty and unsophisticated, and treated with contempt. Visitors from further afield, however, found it fascinating that these ‘noble savages’ were on Britain’s doorstep. Both of these attitudes demonstrate that the people of St Kilda were perceived as being significantly different from their contemporaries both near and far.

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Significance: +++ = exceptional; ++ = considerable; + = some; blank = little or none
Irish seaboard islands

Although none are as remotely sited as St Kilda, the islands on the Atlantic seaboard off the west coast of Ireland are nevertheless well off the beaten track, and at various points in time housed thriving communities living in relative isolation. However, as the following reveals, all are quite different to the St Kilda archipelago and none have the unique range of qualities that survive so well on Hirta, Boreray, Soay, Dun and the nearby stacs.

7.1 Skellig Michael – World Heritage monastic retreat

The exceptional relict cultural landscape of Skellig Michael, abandoned as early as the 13th century AD, was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1996.

The best surviving example of an isolated early medieval monastic island settlement on the Celtic fringe of Europe, Skellig Michael gives us clues about what a small part of Hirta might have looked like from around the 6th to 8th centuries AD. On Skellig Michael the monks occupied cellular beehive structures made entirely from stone – in the absence of locally available wood. A spartan and very remote existence, they lived on birds, eggs and fish, along with produce from a sheltered monastic garden.

St Kilda also has various strands of evidence for the presence of an Early Christian monastic community, although as yet no structural remains of this period have been located. But this is just one phase in 5000 years or more of St Kilda’s history, and St Kilda displays many other special qualities not found on Skellig Michael.
7.2 Great Blasket – centre of Irish Gaelic culture

Like St Kilda, Great Blasket has a long history of occupation, with a rich ethnographic record and a distinct social structure, and some similarities with St Kilda can usefully be explored. These similarities are, however, actually just very small parts in the overall nature of the place; when considered as a whole, St Kilda is far more significant. The following comparisons are included as examples:

- With a population of up to 176 in the past, Great Blasket was abandoned in 1953 after a steady decline. Just such a decline had taken place on St Kilda some 30 years earlier.
- Like St Kilda, the islanders on the Blaskets met every day at the ‘Dáil’ or Assembly, although this took place in the evening to discuss the day’s events, rather than the St Kildan way which decided on the work plan at the start of the day.
- Although the arrangements of the villages differs, the 19th-century Blasket house-type looks similar to the 1861 ‘whitehouses’ of Hirta’s Village Bay – especially once felt became used for roofing, replacing reed thatch on the Blaskets and zinc sheeting on Hirta.

However, there are also very significant differences between Great Blasket and St Kilda:

- In the early 20th century, scholars visited and encouraged the Blasket islanders to document their folklore and traditions, and a strong Irish Gaelic culture was recorded for posterity – in music, poetry and prose. The oral and documentary record for St Kilda was gathered together on an *ad hoc* basis across many more centuries and is therefore very different in content and bias.
- Up to the early 19th century rod fishing was practised on both islands, but a new type of boat opened up the possibilities on the Blaskets of fishing in open waters. Fishing never became an important part of the St Kildan way of life.
- Other than in times of food shortages, birds and their eggs were taken by the Blasket islanders more as a delicacy than as part of the staple diet. Seabirds were a fundamental part of the food-chain on St Kilda, and were an important means of ‘paying’ the rent.
- The 19th-century Blasket houses differed from those on the nearby mainland. In contrast, on Hirta it was the earlier structures that deviated from the mainland norm, with full integration of mainstream vernacular architectural styles from the 1830s onwards – with the exception of the *cleitean*, which continued to be built in their unique way.

The Blasket way of life does not compare to that on Hirta in terms of form and integrity, nor is there anything like the concentration or good preservation of monuments in the landscape as there is on Hirta as a whole.
7.3 Innishmurray – whiskey island

Innishmurray is a fairly typical example of the islands on the western seaboard of Ireland. It had a long history of occupation which ended in 1948 with the evacuation of the last 46 inhabitants. Although only four miles offshore, the island could nevertheless be cut off for long periods during winter, and on several days each summer.

Also like St Kilda, natural resources were relatively poor and restricted, but on Innishmurray the food supply was based on fish rather than birds. In the 19th century and up to the evacuation, however, the economy was mainly based on the sale of illicit whiskey – mirroring the St Kildan move away from subsistence produce from the late 19th century onwards, as a result of increasing contact or trade with the outside world.

Whilst Innishmurray has some superficial similarities, St Kilda possesses a much greater number of features from all periods of human occupation; the preservation of the related structures on St Kilda is superb; and the associated documentary sources for the post-medieval period are much more extensive.

7.4 Tory Island village fan

The distinctive arc of Village Bay on Hirta is a response to the form of the available landscape and the resources within it. A similar layout survives on Tory Island off the west coast of Ireland, where the arc of the village fits within a small area of land suitable for agriculture, and a fan of strip fields emanates from the house plots.

However, Hirta exhibits much more than just the parallel layout of village street, attached fields and seaside bay. It is an island with prehistoric and historic settlement patterns and closely associated agricultural divisions and evidence across its entirety, which itself is part of a wider archipelago providing vast food and rent resources, in the form of seabirds, extra grazing lands and places for seasonal or year-round occupation: a complete human ecological system.

7.5 Irish seaboard comparisons

The above examples represent relatively remote islands on the western seaboard of Ireland. Many were occupied for centuries or even millennia and then abandoned. A few exhibited some divergence in social organisation, music and the arts, and folklore, but for the most part little of this has been documented – with the notable exception of the Blaskets. However, none of these places benefits from the St Kildan level of preservation of the evidence, both physically and in the writings of travellers. None compares favourably in terms of the time-depth of the landscape; the story of sustainability; the effects of extreme isolation in terms of divergence and local distinctiveness; nor St Kilda’s later status reflecting a heroic community surviving in the face of adversity.
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North-west frontiers of Europe

Norse traders, travellers and warriors proved that the seemingly remote islands and fjords in the far north-west seaboard of Europe could sustain small populations, and supply sometimes exotic produce that was valued in the growing towns and cities of Europe and beyond. The last millennium in particular saw the establishment of isolated communities who found a living from the sea and the land. The harshness of the environment and the lack of opportunities often led to the abandonment of these outposts, although in some cases their products continued to have enough value to make it worthwhile to carry on the traditional land-uses of their ancestors: ‘continuing cultural landscapes’.

8.1 Vega – World Heritage cultural landscape

The Norwegian archipelago of Vega, inscribed to the World Heritage List in 2004, might appear to be one of the best places with which to compare and contrast St Kilda, but it is physically very much larger, with, historically, a far higher population that still exists today. Immediately there is, therefore, a difference in scale as well as in specific characteristics. In this, and many other ways, St Kilda is easily distinguished from the Vega World Heritage Site.

Like St Kilda, Vega has a long tradition of human settlement based on exploiting the fruits of the coastal environment. The unique economy, based strongly on eider ducks, led to the creation of the *e-hus* or *e-bane* – special eider duck houses. However, there was strong outside trading influence from early times, the eider down trade being controlled from at least the Norse period until the early 20th century. Thus Vega has strong cultural links with its trading partners in the ports of the Norwegian coast, contrasting with the isolation suffered on St Kilda. Vega also has a wide base of natural resources at its disposal, including access to large agricultural areas, and to rich fishing opportunities. This contrasts strongly with the St Kildan subsistence way of life which ended at the time of the evacuation in 1930.

Survival of vernacular settlements: The trading centre of Roroy on Vega reputedly remains much the same as when first established in the 18th century, and the interior and external architectural features reflect the power, wealth and distant cultural influence that came with trade. The Street on Hirta also reflects external influences of the time, and remains remarkably intact, but represents an everyday vernacular building tradition at the opposite end of the spectrum from the higher status of Roroy. This difference is accentuated when other architectural forms are added to the equation – such as the bothies on Boreray and the shelters on Stac Li and Stac an Armin.

Skjaervaer, Vega: settlement in the vernacular tradition of the area; no buildings are more than 100-200 years old

The Factor’s House, Hirta: those buildings with an official function were built by the distant landlord to mainland designs; until 1834, all other vernacular structures were built in the relatively primitive local style
Eider down and eggs: The Vega archipelago was a key area for the development and operation of egg and down collecting, and up to a third of the annual income was based on this. Traces can still be found of many eider houses in which the birds would nest. These specialised structures are reminiscent of the drystone cleitean of St Kilda – some of which were also connected with fowling. The cleitean, however, are a unique feature of St Kilda: those found in steep boulder fields, on the stacs and at cliff edges, being where birds or bird eggs were stored and dried after catching.

The continuing cultural landscape of Vega is interesting to compare and contrast with St Kilda: it has a very long-established and thriving bird-based economy; the evidence of external influence survives well in places; its eider houses are a particular response to the natural resources; and there is a long history of human settlement. But Vega, sheltered from the ocean by an outer rim of islets and skerries, always owed its viability to fishing and trade, while the St Kildans were effectively on their own for most of the year, and relied almost entirely, for most of their history, on the scant resources they found around them. Both Vega and St Kilda could be classed as ‘Globally Important Ingenious Agricultural Heritage Systems’ as defined by United Nations Food Agricultural Organization (GIAHS; see Appendix D). Both systems, and their historical roots, should be, and are, cherished for what they tell us about, and what we can learn from, people’s ingenuity to work with nature in a sustainable way. However, St Kilda is easily distinguished from the Vega World Heritage Site by its subsistence way of life which ended in 1930, and the wealth and density of its very functional vernacular architecture, particularly the cleitean – a unique feature of the St Kilda archipelago.
8.2 Mastad – isolated bird-based economy

‘Their greatest treasure on earth…’

The village of Mastad and its immediate environs within Vaeroy of the Lofoten Islands, Norway, shares useful parallels with St Kilda, even though it is but a small part of the whole island. For the inhabitants of this remote community the seabirds that nested on the cliffs surrounding their village were their greatest treasure. They harvested the eggs and adult birds and salted the meat to last them through the winter. Puffin was the favourite meat, which they hunted with their unique six toed puffin dog, but razorbills and guillemots were also caught in nets. As on St Kilda, the feathers provided a source of income from which they could buy imported goods. And like St Kilda, arable land was at a premium and the landscape forced a radial pattern of field systems with echoes of the village on Hirta. The lack of a proper harbour, and better opportunities elsewhere, resulted in the population declining from about 150 people until it was finally abandoned by its last inhabitant in 1974.

Sadly, the timber building tradition of Mastad means that few structures of significant age have survived, and their predecessors have left few traces of their former existence, whereas the stone building tradition of St Kilda has left the islands littered with evidence of use by countless generations of islanders.

The restricted area of this isolated bird-based economy and the lack of upstanding evidence for time-depth contrasts with that for St Kilda – a seabird economy par excellence within an agricultural landscape which, taken as a whole, is of extraordinary cultural value.
8.3 Faeroe Islands – remote trading posts

Although not comparable to St Kilda in terms of their size and much greater number of islands, the Faeroe Islands are relatively remote, and largely dependent on the rich resources of the North Atlantic, sometimes relying heavily on fowling. Their timber drying sheds, the hjallur, are similar in purpose to the St Kildan cleitean: for drying and preserving mutton, fish and seabirds to last them through the winter. However, the Faeroes are much richer in resources, and much less isolated in terms of trade and communications, and therefore more in tune with regional society, culture and traditions.

Hidey holes: The folklore of the Faeroes tells of small shelters – fransatofir – where people hid from pirates. Such structures are still to be found in the rocky screes of St Kilda: these ‘hidey holes’ are virtually invisible and are recorded as having been used to hide from unwelcome visitors to the village.

Local tradition: As in most landscapes, the place-names of the Faeroes are sometimes associated with myths and legends. A pregnant milkmaid called Malan, for instance, when teased for not keeping up with the others, is said to have picked up a 176kg rock and challenged others to do the same. Calum Mor’s house on St Kilda has a similar story of strength: it is said to have been built in a day by Calum to prove his manliness.

8.4 The north-west European context

Even these seemingly very remote places on the north-west outskirts of Europe were in fact once part of a thriving and well-established trading network, and almost everywhere relied on trade rather than the basic subsistence practised on St Kilda. This is explained by St Kilda’s location – well off the beaten track, and with too few commodities to be worth the detour. The bounty of the seas was also used elsewhere to support the mixed land-based agriculture, whereas St Kildans treated the treacherous surrounding seas with caution and respect, and took very little in the way of fish, seals or whales. But perhaps the most significant resource difference was the availability of timber – to build houses, boats, fences, and to make everyday items. With no home-grown timber, and little coming in through trade or even as driftwood, elements of the unusual architectural tradition of St Kilda continued until the archipelago was evacuated in 1930.

Calum Mor’s House, Hirta: a complete survivor from before the 19th century, associated with the legend of Calum Mor

| Time-depth       | ++ | + | + |
| Completeness of landscape system | ++ | + | + |
| Sustainability/self-sufficiency | ++ | + | + |
| Levels of preservation/survival | ++ | + | + |
| Level of documentary evidence | ++ | + | + |
| Comparative deviation/ingenuity | ++ | + | + |
| Remoteness and isolation | ++ | + | + |
| Dramatic landscape setting | ++ | + | + |
| Abandonment/unsustainability | ++ | + | + |

Significance: +++ = exceptional; ++ = considerable; + = some; blank = little or none
The global experience

Part of the iconic status of St Kilda relates to its profound feeling of remoteness and isolation. In European terms it is certainly unusually far from the nearest major landfall, to the extent that the medieval writer John of Fordun (c.1380) thought it was ‘… on the margin of the world …’. King James IV (1473-1513) thought St Kilda was even too remote to include within his kingdom!

The story of sustainability is one that can be compared and contrasted with other remote places in the world, where responses to limited natural resources could also be ingenious – though very different to St Kilda. Equally interesting are the stories of unsustainable practices and the influence of outsiders leading to the demise of previously sustainable ways of life.

However, such comparisons do not bear close scrutiny: it is only helpful to look at individual characteristics or similarities: nowhere could be found to parallel the range of outstanding features that makes St Kilda so extraordinary.

Rapa Nui – diminishing resources and isolated society

The World Heritage Site of Rapa Nui – the most remote inhabited place in the world – is famous for the unsustainable consequences of its religious practices; practices that are recorded in the monumental sculptures and sacred sites that still survive on the island. Conversely, St Kilda is famous for its sustainable practices, which only became too difficult through external influences, and when the population fell below a certain level. The natural resources on which the St Kildans survived continue to be available today.
Pico Island, Azores – specialist building traditions

The remote island community of Pico developed a local way of life to suit the seemingly barren hills of their home. Parts of the island are covered in currais – distinctive stone-walled enclosures for sheltering the growing vines, reminiscent, in terms of density and divergent architectural style, to the cleitean of St Kilda. However, the Azores were only settled from the mid-15th century, and their economy is based on trade rather than the self-sufficient way of life of St Kilda. As well as the vineyards, the Pico islanders had rich farming, whaling, fishing, and woodland – all of which contributed to economic sustainability.

The World Heritage Site of Pico Island exhibits just 500 years of settlement history which was sustained by a vigorous trading system. St Kilda has a considerably greater time-depth and an isolated self-sufficiency that meant that its lack of economic partners was unimportant.

Tristan da Cunha – remote outliers

St Kilda and the remote South Atlantic island group of Tristan da Cunha both relied heavily on the seabird harvest, and used adjacent islands for some of their grazing animals. Both island groups suffered from a lack of communications, and have similar histories of emigration and boating disasters. But Tristan da Cunha lacks the cultural time-depth of St Kilda – with just 200 years of human settlement, and the preservation of the cultural landscape of St Kilda is in no way matched by its South Atlantic counterpart. **St Kilda has a time-depth that reflects 5000 years of human occupation, with a density of structural and agricultural evidence which is quite astounding.**

A cultural landscape is a memorial to the unknown labourer.’ (Fowler 2001, 77)

Tristan da Cunha from the air: topographically resembling St Kilda, but culturally worlds apart

Currais on Pico and the An Lag exclosures on Hirta: devising special responses to the geology, topography and climate was essential to the sustainability of both agricultural systems

Man used to have a harmonious and respectful relation with Nature. He used to be humble and knew that he was dependent on Nature. (Feliu 2003, 39)
Glacier Bay, Alaska – external social influences

The story of the abandonment of the native Tlingit villages in the 19th century has parallels with St Kilda. The Tlingit experience of huge external influence is mirrored on St Kilda by the remodelling of the village, by the effects of diseases brought in by outsiders, and by the ability of the St Kildans to adapt to new ways of life. The evidence of this on St Kilda is contained within the rich documentary record, and in the physical remains that are spread across the whole landscape.

The Glacier Bay story is characterised by the strength of socio-economic changes enforced on the population in the 19th century by landlord/magnates. St Kilda also went through major socio-economic changes but they were not all-embracing, nor were they introduced purely for the profit of the landlord.

Tlingit and St Kildan women selling their local wares and souvenirs (1880s and 1894): tourism may have seemed like a life-line, but was also a noose which tightened round the old ways of life.
Hawar Islands, Bahrain – an abandoned bird economy

Little documentation remains of the vibrant subsistence economy that once characterised Hawar, where the inhabitants exploited birds and their eggs as well as shellfish and fish stocks. It was not until the late 1960s that the physical isolation and the lack of healthcare and educational facilities made the fishing villages of southern and western Bahrain more tempting, and the islands were largely deserted.

Until comparatively recently the Hawar Islands supported a vibrant society dependent on its seabirds, but the influence of modern society led to the abandonment of the traditional ways. St Kilda was similarly dependent on its seabirds, but although it too has been abandoned, the upstanding evidence for the past way of life remains incredibly rich and dense.

The global context

Although World Heritage cultural landscapes tend mainly to reflect the distinctive characteristics of their own geo-cultural region, it has been illuminating to look at St Kilda in the context of a few other remote communities around the world. In this comparison we can see that, although based on different agricultural systems and from a different cultural background, St Kilda is an extremely well-preserved example of a phenomenon that continues to the present day: communities living ‘on the edge’ in subsistence economies which only fail, or are threatened by failure, because of external influences, rather than because the inhabitants have acted unsustainably: Rapa Nui being the exception that proves the rule. It is essential that we recognise and cherish the best-preserved examples of such cultural landscapes in different regions of the world, as reminders of the importance of maintaining our balance with nature.
Conclusions

This additional comparative analysis has been a helpful exercise, which has set St Kilda more firmly in its regional and wider context. The analysis has established the links with other islands in the same geo-cultural location and set out some similarities. However, the analysis has also highlighted clear and distinct differences between St Kilda and other north European islands and other remote communities.

The places that have been considered here are all important cultural landscapes, and some include acknowledged features of ‘outstanding universal value’, but no place in the world has been found which better demonstrates the unique combination of features that makes St Kilda recognised around the world as an icon of remote island living and sustainable subsistence. St Kilda is therefore ideally placed to represent remote island culture in the north-west Atlantic coast of Europe.

What has emerged is that St Kilda is linked culturally to several other sites: the difference is that St Kilda exhibits a greater range of qualities, and exhibits those qualities better than other places. St Kilda can be seen as representative of a type of isolated island culture, but is the best exemplar of this in having qualities in such abundance as well as the evocative spiritual qualities associated with its remoteness, isolation and aesthetic landscape qualities.

While many of the places cited above have fascinating stories to tell, their stories belong to a significantly different cultural tradition. St Kilda retains the most complete physical legacy of this type of tiny island community, dwarfed by nature yet able to live in harmony with its environment until the values and influences of the wider world made the islanders’ way of life untenable. The iconic St Kilda story of sustainability followed by abandonment catches the imagination of people from around the world. Today, visitors can still stand in the village street and easily imagine the community in its heyday, an experience that touches the heart of everyone who has made the pilgrimage to the island ‘at the edge of the world’.

Several existing World Heritage Sites were considered in this comparative analysis, but none were found to cover the same qualities as St Kilda. Some are ‘globally important ingenious agricultural heritage systems’, but all have significantly different characteristics from St Kilda. The conclusion is that the tangible and intangible inheritance, preserved so well on this small group of tiny, remote islands, is not currently represented on the World Heritage List.

The cultural landscapes of Europe are among the world’s richest, most diverse and complex heritage assets and their definition, classification and management are very difficult. WHC 1996
Happy St Kildan children in 1909: those who survived were evacuated from the islands on 29 August 1930.
APPENDICES

Introduction

In preparing the comparative analysis for St Kilda it was necessary to research into current international thinking about cultural landscapes – particularly in the World Heritage context. It is useful to include some of the observations from this research as appendices to the main report, and to examine how St Kilda fits into this bigger picture.

The following analysis is based largely on quotes and extracts from key documents of the last decade. It begins with a short examination of the definitions of World Heritage cultural landscapes, then looks at some of the key attributes that such landscapes tend to or are expected to exhibit. This is followed by the reproduction of extracts from the key ICOMOS and IUCN guidelines on the subject, and the appendices are completed by looking at St Kilda in the context of the current UN FAO initiative on Globally Important Ingenious Agricultural Heritage Systems.

Appendix a. Defining cultural landscapes

Cultural landscapes, more than any other type of site, represent the ‘combined works of nature and man’ anticipated in Article 1 of the World Heritage Convention.

‘World Heritage cultural landscapes have now begun to define themselves collectively. They are characterised: Geographically/topographically/functionally by: mountains, water, farming and inhabited settlements including towns; Intellectually by: historical and/or cultural significance, continuity and tradition, religiosity and aesthetics.’ (Fowler 2003, 50)

The quote from Fowler’s analysis of currently inscribed World Heritage cultural landscapes demonstrates very well the degree to which St Kilda fits the trend. The same close fit can be seen in Plachter and Rössler’s paper from the Le Petite Pierre discussions:

‘Cultural landscapes reflect the interactions between people and their natural environment over space and time. Nature, in this context, is the counterpart to human society; both are dynamic forces, shaping the landscapes. In some regions of the world, cultural landscapes stand out as models of interaction between people, their social system and the way they organise space. A cultural landscape is a complex phenomenon with a tangible and an intangible identity. The intangible component arises from ideas and interactions which have an impact on the perceptions and shaping of a landscape, such as sacred beliefs closely linked to the landscape and the way it has been perceived over time. Cultural landscapes mirror the cultures which created them.’ (Plachter and Rössler 1995, 15)

These results of the meeting at Le Petite Pierre in October 1992 were integrated into the Operational Guidelines, into which St Kilda fits perfectly:

‘[cultural landscapes] are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal. They should be selected on the basis both of their outstanding universal value and of their representativity in terms of a clearly defined geo-cultural region and also for their capacity to illustrate the essential and distinct cultural elements of such regions.’ (WHC 1999, para. 36)

Appendix b. Characteristics of cultural landscapes

Cultural landscapes are now inscribed on the World Heritage List ‘to reveal and sustain the great diversity of the interactions between humans and their environment, to protect living traditions and cultures and preserve traces of those which have disappeared...’ (WHC web page – http://whc.unesco.org/exhibits/cultland/landscape.htm)

An examination of the literature quickly shows how well St Kilda fits into the expected characteristics of cultural landscapes. The following quotes are just a selection of those which demonstrate St Kilda’s appropriateness for inclusion in the World Heritage List as a cultural landscape, based on both cultural and natural criteria.
**Culture and nature:** ‘States Parties should as far as possible endeavour to include in their submissions properties which derive their outstanding universal value from a particularly significant combination of cultural and natural features.’ (WHC 2001, Para. 18)

St Kilda is already inscribed on the World Heritage List for its natural features, three of which relate directly to the islands’ value as a cultural landscape: the dramatic landscape setting; the million seabirds that are present each year; and the ancient Soay sheep.

**Time-depth:** ‘…significant material evidence of its evolution through time [is] a major precondition for consideration as a World Heritage cultural landscape.’ (Fowler 2004, 128)

Evidence exists for human occupation on St Kilda from Neolithic times onwards. Archaeologists are constantly making even more discoveries, and it is clear that much more evidence from all periods has yet to be recorded or understood.

**Integrity:** The meaning of the word integrity is wholeness, completeness, unimpaired or uncorrupted condition, continuation of traditional uses and social fabric. Integrity is the extent to which the layered historic evidence, meanings and relationships between elements remain intact and can be interpreted in the landscape.’ (Fowler 2003, 20)

The layered historic evidence, meanings and relationships between elements on St Kilda is unusually intact, and a wealth of accompanying documentary evidence allows the deep understanding and appreciation of the landscape.

**Ordinariness:** ‘By recognising cultural landscapes we have … given ourselves the opportunity to recognise places which may well look ordinary but can fill out in our appreciation to become extraordinary.’ (Fowler 2004, 31)

It may seem paradoxical that ordinary places can be extraordinary, but this is certainly true of St Kilda. The extraordinary thing is that people could sustain a worthwhile living in such extreme and isolated conditions.

**Resonance:** ‘…a cultural landscape of World Heritage quality should have something about it – ambience, atmosphere, presence, authority, vibes – which give it a resonance many people can recognise, setting it apart.’ (Fowler 2004, 129)

St Kilda has a powerful spirit of place, which enchants those who have been privileged to have visited. Each year, journalists and film-makers go to the islands to try to capture this quality; the resultant articles, films and television programmes resonate with millions of people around the world.

**Sustainability:** ‘Cultural landscapes often reflect systems of sustainable land use, which need to be identified, supported and publicized.’ (Phillips 2001, 47)

Sustainability: ‘Throughout history, local societies have ebbed and flowed as their wisdom was tested against the criterion of sustainability. Those societies that were able to develop the wisdom, technology, and knowledge to live within the limits of their environments were able to survive. Others over-exploited their resource, so they flourished only briefly, giving up sustainability and adaptability for a flash-in-a-pan flush of immediate wealth.’ (McNeely and Keeton 1995, 25)

The GIAHS initiative (Appendix D) shows how important it is to learn lessons from past stewardship of the land. The stories embedded within the St Kildan landscapes provide us with both inspiration and a precautionary tale.

**Biodiversity:** ‘…the protection of traditional cultural landscapes is therefore helpful in maintaining biological diversity.’ (WHC 1999, Para. 38)

**Stewardship:** ‘Small farmers in traditional agricultural systems are custodians of significant plant and animal genetic resources…’ (FAO 2002, 2)

The preservation of the gene pool of the Soay sheep is one of the greatest legacies of the St Kildan way of life. The sheep were hunted rather than tended, and have probably remained genetically separate from other breeds since the Neolithic.

**Vernacular, know-how:** ‘Let us try to make the concept of authenticity evolve into a concept which encompasses all the different, cultural architectural expressions and manifestations of the world, monumental and vernacular – built not only of stone, but also of wood, earth or straw or other materials. In this way we could move on from a concept of authenticity focused on material and technique only, to one, including also the know-how, the context of the
natural and social environment, which would safeguard also the context and spirit of the original builder or culture.’ (Von Droste 1995, 23)

**Non-elitist**: ‘despite their name and any superior overtones suggested by the label ‘World Heritage’, most cultural landscapes are not elitist either as made or as now perceived.’ (Fowler 2003, 57)

The ability to recognise the importance of the vernacular is one of the great strengths of the cultural landscape concept. St Kilda has no elitist buildings or architectural marvels, but in its way it is nevertheless of profound importance in regional cultural terms, and as a beacon of sustainability in world terms.

### Appendix c. St Kilda in the context of ICOMOS and IUCN cultural landscape guidelines

In examining and comparing the qualities of the St Kilda landscape, it is helpful to look at the assessment guidelines for cultural landscapes for the two advisory bodies (ICOMOS and IUCN). The following extracts of their respective guidelines have been highlighted to draw out the issues and qualities relevant to St Kilda, as presented in the main body of the comparative analysis.

#### Appendix c.1 Assessment of cultural qualities in cultural landscapes (ICOMOS 2001)

Within the framework provided by the World Heritage Committee’s six criteria, those acting for ICOMOS in the field, in desk studies and in committee are therefore looking to judge a nomination by asking such questions as:

1. **Is the landscape significant?** If so, in what respect(s) and how is this expressed? ‘Significance’ is a fundamental concept in ICOMOS appraisal, and a prime factor in identifying potential World Heritage landscapes from all the rest. A landscape, for example, may be beautiful without being in any way significant. Had that same landscape been written about and painted, however, by a succession of outstanding artists, who individually and collectively had palpably influenced the course of art and raised human appreciation of landscape, then that landscape is to an extent demonstrably different and arguably significant.

2. **Is the ‘significance’ of the landscape of universal significance?** Here, ICOMOS is looking for evidence that the landscape bears, tells about, or is witness to one or more of the great themes common to all or many of the people of the world: e.g. aspect(s) of the natural/human relationship itself and long-term religiosity, themes which in those cases often interlock as an expression of reverence for a ‘holy’ mountain or river.

3. **Is the landscape outstanding?** If so, in what respect(s)? ICOMOS is here looking for one or more qualities, or a combination of qualities, which lift a particular landscape out of the ordinary. It may, for example, be absolutely outstanding in terms of the engineered reshaping of the landscape and of the aesthetic qualities of the outcome. It may be the site of a great event, such as a battle which was a real turning point significant in world terms. It may be somewhere where outstanding families lived, worked, and created great achievements, even though the landscape itself may not itself be particularly striking in visual terms.

4. Alternatively, is the landscape, rather than being absolutely outstanding, a particularly good representative of a ‘world-type’ of landscape? In this context, ICOMOS values highly comparative studies of such types and/or of examples of landscapes illustrative of a particular theme and/or of potential World Heritage landscapes in a particular region. If a thematic study does not exist, ICOMOS may commission one from an appropriate expert or specialist body. In any case, it greatly appreciates a serious comparative study within a nomination (a requirement of the Operational Guidelines that is often overlooked by States Parties) which places a nominated landscape within a broad, demonstrable context of, for example, land-use type, such as rice-growing, landscape function like transhumance, or landscape design. The systematic nomination of European viticultural landscapes, the
The essence of a cultural landscape in World Heritage terms is that it should contain and demonstrate the interaction of humans and the natural environment.

identification of key industrial landscapes (e.g. of ‘world firsts’), and the encouragement of nominations from under-represented regions like sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, are current examples of what are, whatever their other qualities, in a sense ‘representative’ landscapes.

v. What exactly are the qualities of authenticity and integrity possessed by a particular landscape? … qualities ICOMOS would be looking for could include appropriate (the key word) development over the long term, continuity of function (even though structures may change), sustainability of the bio-economic system(s), long-term stability in land management and infrastructural maintenance, adaptability to changing environmental circumstances, and good survival both of structural elements like buildings, original trackways and field systems and of social factors like community structure, religious observance, traditional working practices, and communal activities.

vi. Is there evidence for a large, even huge, input of human energy and skill, perhaps in moulding an extensive area for a particular function such as worship, irrigation, agriculture, communication, or artistic effect? Was (or is) the effect of such a construct in keeping with or does it even enhance its environment? Was the outcome significantly influential (not just ‘influential’), for example technically or aesthetically?

vii. Is there evidence of long-term management or stewardship? Did this nevertheless end in some form of collapse in the past or has its effect been towards sustainability until the present? What is the significance of this (e.g. historically, technologically, geomorphologically)?

viii. Is the landscape of great scientific value? This question impinges on IUCN’s field of responsibility but nevertheless there are clearly cultural considerations, now and in the future as much as in the past, if a nominated landscape possesses outstanding natural resources such as special floral and faunal communities or scientifically important geological or geomorphological deposits which might well also be, or contain, exploitable minerals. Such may exist now because of past human land management; there may well be local traditions regarding the exploitation of such resources which do not fit comfortably with current conservation thinking. The local community(ies) may itself/themselves be of considerable anthropological interest. Perhaps as an accidental outcome of land-use, a landscape may contain, or itself be, an outstanding ensemble of archaeological survivals of very high academic potential.

Appendix c.2 Assessment of natural qualities in cultural landscapes (IUCN 2001)

Nature in cultural landscapes

The close interest that IUCN has in cultural landscapes derives from the importance of many cultural landscapes for nature conservation and evolution of nature and natural resources. While this may be a characteristic of any of the types of cultural landscapes listed under para. 39 of the Operational Guidelines, in practice it is likely to be most important in the case of continuing, organically evolved landscapes. On the other hand, there will be some cultural landscapes in which IUCN’s interest will be small, or non-existent.

The various natural qualities of cultural landscapes are summarised in the Operational Guidelines:

‘Cultural landscapes often reflect specific techniques of sustainable land use, considering
the characteristics and limits of the natural environment they are established in, and a specific spiritual relationship to nature. Protection of cultural landscapes can contribute to modern techniques of sustainable land use and can maintain or enhance natural values in the landscape. The continued existence of traditional forms of land use supports biological diversity in many regions of the world. The protection of traditional cultural landscapes is therefore helpful in maintaining biological diversity’ (Para. 38, with emphasis added). In addition to these important aspects, there may also be other natural qualities apparent in a cultural landscape:

• outstanding natural beauty and aesthetic values. Some natural World Heritage sites have been inscribed under natural criterion (iii) from the World Heritage Operational Guidelines, as areas ‘of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance’. In the case of cultural landscape, such values would derive as much from the contrast, and/or interaction, between the works of nature and of humankind as from the intrinsic quality of the natural features;

• informative evidence of a uniquely significant past relationship between humanity and nature. This may have been a balanced and sustainable relationship, but it might also have been a negative relationship in which a civilisation collapsed after unsustainable exploitation of natural resources;

• important biodiversity resources may be found both in wild species of fauna and flora, and in domesticated animals and cultivated crops.

Natural criteria for assessing cultural landscapes

Against this background, IUCN will have the following criteria in mind when assessing cultural landscapes.

1. conservation of natural and semi natural ecosystems, and of wild species of fauna and flora: and in particular whether the cultural landscape is an outstanding example of how traditional land use patterns can:
• contribute to the protection of natural ecosystems (e.g. by providing for the protection of watershed forests);
• help protect wild species of fauna or flora;
• help protect genetic diversity within wild species;

• create semi-natural habitats of great importance to biodiversity, i.e. manipulated ecosystems with well structured and functional interactions between its living components.

2. conservation of biodiversity within farming systems: and in particular whether the cultural landscape is an outstanding example of how traditional farm systems can:
• develop and/or conserve a wide range of varieties of domesticated livestock;
• develop and/or conserve a wide range of varieties of cultivated crops, such as cereals, fruit or root vegetables.

3. sustainable land use: and in particular whether the land use practices are an outstanding example of how to:
• respect the productive capability of land;
• conserve the quality and quantity of soil;
• manage and safeguard water quality;
• manage streams and rivers so as to reduce damaging floods and run-off;
• maintain plant cover;
• restore vegetation, soils and sources of water.

4. enhancement of scenic beauty: that is whether the cultural landscape has outstanding scenic qualities, deriving as much from the contrast and/or interaction between the works of nature and humanity as from the intrinsic quality of the natural features themselves (see above).

5. the presence of an outstanding ex situ collection of plants (herbarium, botanic gardens) or of fauna (e.g. collection of waterfowl).

6. evidence of an outstanding example of humanity’s inter-relationship with nature. IUCN may be interested if there is evidence of either a successful or failed relationship between a past civilisation and the natural resources on which it depended.

7. the site of some historically-significant discovery in the natural sciences, i.e. where the associative value derives from such a discovery.
Appendix d. Globally Important Ingenious Agricultural Heritage Systems

The human ecosystem that historically operated on St Kilda does not only tell us about people in the past: it has messages for the future, in terms of sustainability and responses to external pressures. If the St Kildan way of life had survived to the present day, it would not just be of interest as a World Heritage cultural landscape: St Kilda would also have fitted perfectly into a new initiative designed to allow us to learn from fascinating agricultural systems from around the world – Globally Important Ingenious Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS).

The GIAHS initiative, by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, is felt to be needed because ‘...increasing urbanism has distanced millions of people from direct experience of agricultural systems.’ (FAO 2002, 5). It is particularly relevant to St Kilda because it perfectly captures the ingenuity of the islanders: ‘Ingenious was seen in terms of an adaptive response to environmental conditions, especially a very fragile or severe biophysical context, or an adaptation or change of the environmental conditions through innovative practice... The term would ... [apply] to social structures and cultural practices adapted to long-term societal needs and ecological dynamics.’ (FAO 2002, 4).

It is unfortunate that this initiative has come a century too late for St Kilda, but St Kilda clearly has lessons to teach regarding the sustainability of such systems and their communities in the face of external pressures: ‘...some of these systems are currently surviving because of their isolation or remoteness: they might disappear or change drastically once there would be easy access to and from the outside world.’ (FAO 2002, 7).

“Globally Important Ingenious Agricultural Heritage Systems” are multi-species (including cultivars), complex agroecosystems maintained by traditional societies, which are managed casually or at low intensities, as an integral components of a cultural landscape, conserved by societies through a value system that has strong socio-cultural interconnections with the landscape within which they are placed. They are products of eco-cultural interactions occurring in space and time, and may still be evolving. (Ramakrishnan 2004)
St Kilda
a comparative analysis of the cultural landscape

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