

Skomer: a 'hot-spot' for creative journeys between disciplines

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Ray Howard-Jones 'Strength of Creation'

In 1972 a group of staff from the National Museum visited Skomer in search of inspiration for constructing a new interactive gallery display. It was the beginning of a long association between Cardiff academics and Skomer. In my own case, I regularly took a small party of second year undergraduates to the island in the 70s and 80s as an introduction to the applied ecology of conservation management. Many of their individual projects crossed subject boundaries, and highlighted the potential of the island as a cross-curricular experience. In retrospect, being alone for the first time with a real ecological problem set many of them up to embark on highly successful careers in conservation.

One of the highlights of the course in its early days was a visit to the artist Ray Howard-Jones in her incongruous silver streamlined caravan sited by the stream in Marloes Deer Park. Artists are often particularly keen observers and precise recorders of the physical conditions of the natural world. She was convinced that as a result, paintings could be good resources for learning about the deeper meanings of human ecology. She said that through drawing and painting there is produced the visible

token of attention and observation. Facts of colour shape and proportion, which could not be managed in a written or oral description, are grouped in this universal language. This was the very reason why drawing from nature was recommended by Victorian syllabus-makers as a vital element in teaching zoology and botany.

Ray knew the rock pools of her 'private' beach at Renny Slip intimately. This was an alternative point of departure for the islands and it was commonplace to see her diminutive figure huddled against the flying spray in the bow of Terry Davies' boat 'The Sharon', as she sketched a rapid atmospheric record of the voyage to Skokholm. Ray had the additional advantage that she had lived on Skomer in the rabbit-catcher's hut (later the assistant warden's 'chalet') with the photographer Raymond Moore. I took over the hut as the base for our fieldwork, and for many years the students used its pieces of sturdy commonsense furniture made from driftwood by 'the two Rays'. It has been said that Ray's time on Skomer showed her that nature and her deep inner spiritual life, intertwined as it was with Celtic mystery and legends, were important sources of inspiration.

Raymond Moore's reaction to the Pembrokeshire landscape was similar. He avoided studio projects. But, outdoors, ordinary human awareness was not enough. His *Temple Rock* depicts the inner cosmic order of primeval fossilised mudflats, shattered by the random injection of molten rock from the Earth's magma. Yet the image is all of a piece. Fragility becomes its architectural strength.



Raymond Moore; 'Temple Rock', Pembrokeshire

In taking photographs he had to go beyond self-conscious thoughts, which he said obscure the inner unity of things by emphasising their component parts. This is evident in his introduction to a Welsh Arts Council booklet, where he quotes from Seng-Ts'an's seventh century 'Treatise on Faith in the Mind':

*Follow your nature and accord with the Tao;
Saunter along and stop worrying.
If your thoughts are tied you spoil what is genuine
Don't be antagonistic to the world of the senses.
For when you are not antagonistic to it,
It turns out to be the same as complete
Awakening.
The wise person does not strive,
The ignorant man ties himself up....
If you work on your mind with your mind
How can you avoid an immense confusion?*

Poetry was another of Ray Howard-Jones' routes into the environment. Together, in her caravan on the day following the death of W. H. Auden, we reviewed the work of the nature poets and she ended the evening reciting by heart Auden's 'On This Island', which expresses all there is to say about a mind-led voyage to Skomer.

These perspectives on Skomer as a cross-curricular hot-spot, not only for biodiversity but also for revealing conservation's profound ethical and aesthetic implications, sets the stage for my lecture. It is presented as a bridge in the hope that art students would come to see that that scientists and artists can meet on common ecological ground.

My talk will outline and link the following three themes.

1 Making common ground

One of the most influential works on the philosophy of politics, *Leviathan* (1651) by Thomas Hobbes, does not begin as a political treatise but with an outline of aesthetics.

In order to define culture Hobbes brings together the three forms of representation that are normally kept apart, i.e.

- science, representing nature and things;
- politics, representing people;
- and art, representing the coming together of people and things.

His account of the way human beings lived before the advent of culture is famous and pithily powerful: "No arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." This horrifying vision helped initiate the Enlightenment in Europe. Gaining the greatest possible distance from such a state was one of its original drives. It might be maintained that culture in the very broadest sense does ultimately refer only to the domain of the arts. But science, politics and art all tell a cultural tale, and the truth of the tale requires them to be bridged. Science and art each have a place in helping us see, appreciate and think about the natural world. Together with politics they express democracy as a network of technologies, interfaces, platforms, and media that allow feelings of groups and individuals to become a public resource. Matisse expressed this relation of art to environment in a sentence.

“Painting, you see is not about intelligence; it should not try to explain, but rather to express a feeling, through colour and design.”.

In other words, art links scientific explanations with a vision of nature as an all pervading whole. The whole has given rise to our being, and of the Earth in particular as a magnificent system that supports life and the immediate source of everything in it that we value. Profound awe and reverence for Nature have always been a central element in science. As Einstein put it, "in this materialistic age of ours the serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people." The naturalist, writer and broadcaster L Hugh Newman, in his introduction to a book of superb black and white photographs entitled 'World of Nature' by the Czech, V J Stanek, expressed the powerful storytelling combination of art and science in the following way.

‘The photographs in this book have one thing in common: they all sing exquisite variations on the same theme. It is the theme of life, the beauty of birth and growth and existence. Birds and their young, animals and their young, the butterflies which emerge from the chrysalises... all have their part in the pattern. And in the shapes and shadows of trees, clouds and water and the ground beneath our feet we can find another pattern; the intricate, enchanting background against which we live and move and have our being. Even in death and decay, and in the bleakness of winter, there is a sombre magnificence which can awe the beholder and uplift his spirit in an inexplicable way’.

From a political viewpoint, one of the legitimate roles of art is to stimulate public reflection and debate about the key issues of our time. Indeed, much of 'nature in art' today is concerned with articulating issues of climate change and extinction that can only be turned around by the mobilisation of political will.

2 Romancing nature

John Locke (1632-1704) sparked the "Age of Reason" by teaching that all true knowledge must be empirically verified. Empiricism taught that a statement is meaningful only if it can be verified by observation and experiment. Thus any statements about entities such as God, Unicorns, Love, and Beauty would be meaningless because they cannot be proven by the scientific method. In revolt, Rousseau (1712-1778) cried: "Let us return to nature", because only in nature can the spirit of humankind be found meaningful. He saw the sciences turning humanity into mere machines bereft of essence. He took the view that "man was born free, but everywhere he is in chains" because empiricism caused people to believe that meaningful thought must be verified by science. Rousseau saw this as dangerous to the freedom of thought and thus sparked the Romantic Movement; which sought to revive humanity by portraying life and nature in all their glory. Three poets that romanced nature during this era were William Wordsworth, John Keats and Alfred Tennyson. They each sought hot-spots of environmental diversity where daily walks triggered their creativity.

Skomer, a small windswept island off the coast of Pembrokeshire, is such a hot-spot, representative of the entire world where the findings of science and art can be expressed as the product of romantic endeavour. It is a landscape that can be represented from many viewpoints:

- as a view through a medium (paint, TV, digital screen);
- as a medium itself that carries messages and meanings embedded in the environment/scene about social, geological, and historical messages and can be extracted and decoded;
- as an exploration of social practice expressing visual appropriation, identity and power;
- as a conservation feature that may be monitored visually and quantitatively to assess the success of management;
- as a poetic expression that gives utterance to some of the most elementary, and, at the same time, obscure, sensations of individuals confronted by the eternal spectacle of nature.

These are just five ways through which landscape participates in human culture.

Regarding making bridges between art and science, even Auden lacked confidence to confront science. As he put it, “When I find myself in the company of scientists, I feel like a shabby curate who has strayed by mistake into a drawing-room full of dukes”. Nevertheless, I would defy any scientist to argue that ‘On This Island’ is not an accurate description of Skomer’s ecology as a human value system.

*Look, stranger, on this island now
The leaping light for your delight discovers,
Stand stable here
And silent be,
That through the channels of the ear
May wander like a river
The swaying sound of the sea.*

*Here at a small field's ending pause
Where the chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges
Oppose the pluck
And knock of the tide,
And the shingle scrambles after the suck-
-ing surf, and a gull lodges
A moment on its sheer side.*

*Far off like floating seeds the ships
Diverge on urgent voluntary errands,
And this full view
Indeed may enter
And move in memory as now these clouds do,
That pass the harbour mirror
And all the summer through the water saunter.*

3 Skomer’s aesthetic platform

The report of the 1946 local expedition to the island has an aesthetic thread running through its findings. Statements of a range of observers, from the expedition’s cook to its botanist, express Skomer’s impact in colourful language that was never again used in official reports. These memorable experiences express colour and joy in

nature after the horrors and deprivations of war, and have been condensed into the following paraphrase.

Skomer is a grey/green island all the more obvious by contrasting it with neighbouring Skokholm, which is red/green. This difference reflects the fact that Skomer is composed principally of monochrome igneous rocks. For example, soda rhyolites are cream-coloured, well developed in the North Cliff, Tom's House and the Basin. They include layers composed of remarkable nodules called spherulites, which may occur in strings or layers or clustered together in bunches or nests. The mugearites are dark grey rocks weathering to a paler colour and often stained red at the surface. In their mineral composition they are not very different from the preceding rocks but the relative proportions of the minerals are different. The marloesites at Bull Hole are dark purple with small crystal-filled geodes. All the rocks are mantled with lichens in blue green, velvet black and orange yellow. The sharp angled grey outcrops poking through the central plateau in parallel east to west lines, and the dark bays, havens, clefts and upended rocks inundated by the sea, all record a sequence of lava flows that once oozed and spread over the ocean floor four hundred million years ago.

In 1946, and in every year since then, Spring comes to this vivid storm-swept sub-Atlantic plateau, and the little earth-bound inhabitants came forth from their secret hiding places, to find the aerial birds and butterflies and moths and winged insects moving over their heads, migrating to or from or across the island, while the beautiful and tender colours of the fresh summer flowers spread rapidly over the surface. Day after day, remarkable colour/sound associations become embedded in memory. For example, the liquid cry of the curlew, summons up the lovely blue of the sea, and the fantastic colours of distant cliffs.

Visits to Skomer are usually made at the breeding season of the seabirds in May, June and July. These are often also the months of the finest weather in the west, when the cliff flowers, the most arresting of the floral sequence of the island, are at their best, seen as they are against a background of ultramarine sea, and hosts of whiter than white seabirds coming and going against the paler blue of the sky. In May the high eastern slopes are purple-blue with large strong-stemmed bluebells; and below are snow-white drifts of sea-campion, which has succeeded, and partly mingles with the greener white of the early flowering scurvy-grass. In June the general colour changes to a delicate pink as acres of the beautiful sea-pink come into blossom, especially on the exposed western and southern cliffs. On the sheltered ledges of the north-east side, where there is sufficient soil, the luxuriant maritime variety of the red campion triumphs over the fading flowers of the primrose, bluebell and sea-campion. In July, Skomer has assumed a viridescent colouring made up of the pale grass-green of the rabbit-grazed turf and the darker green of the maturing bracken. This is relieved in August by bright yellow patches of ragwort. The first high winds of autumn quickly turn the exposed areas of the bracken a russet brown.

On a much smaller scale are the strange large richly coloured wheatears that appear in mid-May. They are conspicuous enough in comparison with the resident wheatears, then busy nesting, and by their behaviour too it is obvious that they are passage-migrants, bound for the far north.

Occasionally an immature puffin turns up in summer still wearing the first winter plumage, and with the dark face and very pale lemon-coloured legs of winter. Typically it has no brood spots, but displays the usual yellow false 'lips' (the rectal rosette) and blue-grey orbital decorations.

On close observation, the Atlantic seal is the biggest subtle mass of colour coming together in one species. The bull may be distinguished from the cow not only by his greater size, but by his darker colour, and by the deep wrinkles, which furrow the sides of his neck; and his underparts are usually darker than in the cow. The cows are usually a light slate-grey on the back, but on the chest and belly they are a light yellowish fawn, dappled with dark spots, like the breast of a mistle-thrush. When they dive they often show their thrush-patterned breasts as they go.

Overall, the circling year on Skomer provides a slide show of shifts in colour that goes at a faster and more concentrated pace than on the mainland. The perception of colour is also changed as the seasons pass. In particular, the atmospheric effects of a clear autumn day can reveal an otherworldly sharpness of tone and colour.

Skomer's diversity is also remarkable because habitats change every few steps. This is because it is a maritime environment dominated by wind and salt. The most tiny barrier or undulation that reduces exposure to the dominant south westerly gales will produce a dramatic rise in biodiversity.



Susie Bellamy: South Valley Stream

