

# Building on superlatives

**Carolyn Lloyd Brown** discusses the issues facing Kielder Water and Forest Park and how the project and client team worked together to create a master plan for the site that has 'water' as its focal point

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Above: The sheer scale of Kielder is exhilarating and slightly daunting  
Below: Interior of Skyspace

## A great big challenge!

If you are full of superlatives as a destination, where do you go next? Kielder Water and Forest Park are facing that challenge and seeking innovative solutions to give them a revitalised competitive edge. They are planning to achieve this through a range of investments in interpretation, infrastructure and marketing.

But let's start with the superlatives. Kielder Water is the largest man made lake in Europe and Kielder Forest is the largest man made forest in England. Together they are located in north-west Northumberland, adjacent to the Northumberland National Park. Kielder is a stunning and dramatic landscape that attracts over 400,000 visitors each year and contributes over £6million to the local economy alone.

The key to unlocking its potential lies in those superlatives – its sheer scale and the fact that it is a robust, artificial landscape that is managed for the commercial supply of water and timber.

The key stakeholders for Kielder have formed a Partnership that works hard to build a range of appealing recreational and cultural product offers that enable visitors to enjoy the tranquillity of the landscape. The Partnership has also sought to develop a strong synergy between the environment and contemporary art and architecture. As a result, Kielder provides something for everyone: the opportunity for both quiet and active recreation, coupled with hospitality, educational activities and some stunning and intriguing art installations, including the internationally acclaimed *Skyspace* by James Turrell<sup>1</sup>.

## What are the issues?

Why the need for new ideas? Well, despite its success, the Partners are aware that competition for visitors is intense and that Kielder's relatively remote location means that it must offer something distinctive to attract new visitors, in particular the family market. Within one and a half hours travel time, Kielder has a potential market of 2.8 million residents and 0.5 million tourist trips to Northumberland each year.

Kielder had suffered from piecemeal development over 25 years and subsequently has three visitor centres strung along the southern shore of the lake, all of which are competing for business and confusing visitors in the process. The Partnership agreed that they wanted Kielder to be bigger, bolder and better – a 'must visit' destination capable of attracting and managing 1 million visitors a year by 2010.

Kielder has a number of issues directly relating to its waterscape:

- The lake is a reservoir and is therefore subject to extensive changes in water level. This means that access directly onto the water via pontoons, for example, can be difficult and costly
- The lake is very deep and therefore supports a limited amount of flora and fauna. This is compensated for by a smaller reservoir, Bakethin, which lies adjacent to Kielder and which is a nature reserve
- There is currently limited access around the lake perimeter due to lack of infrastructure and commercial logging operations



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**The Kielder Partnership's Vision Statement:**

Kielder Water and Forest Park offers Europe's finest water and forest experience on a grand scale, providing visitors with year round ever-changing adventure within a peaceful and stunning location. Kielder provides high quality facilities night and day, winter or summer, all with a distinctive Northumberland flavour and warm welcome. Whatever visitors are seeking, whether tranquillity or exhilaration, Kielder is the place to be inspired by nature.

- There is a ferry service that operates as a pleasure boat tour but which is intermittent and under-promoted
- There is very little interpretation about the lake and much is confined to corporate messages about water treatment
- There is little opportunity for casual visitors to engage directly with the lake or with water and enjoy it for the emotional return that waterscapes typically provide.

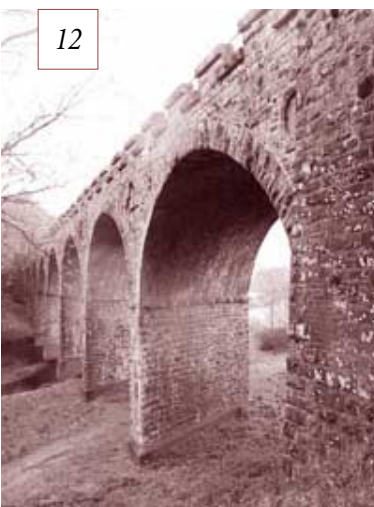
Our approach endeavoured to address all of these challenges (and many more!) by turning them into new opportunities for visitors to gain insight into this stunning landscape of vast skies reflected in still water.

**The role for interpretation**

Interpretation is to be an important and integral part of the visitor experience to engage both regular, repeat visitors as well as one-off visitors. A lot of work has been undertaken on branding and market placement, and PLB were able to build upon this to inform the team's thinking. A 'brand essence' had been created for Kielder that was: *The Freedom to be Adventurous, Wild, Creative*. However, at that stage the Partnership had not crystallised their vision for Kielder as a visitor destination. We therefore worked closely with the client team to clarify their thinking and thus move forward to create a long-term plan that was ambitious yet achievable. It was interesting to see that Sam Ham referred to the process of 'brand-synergy' in a recent article<sup>2</sup> and I realise in retrospect that this was very much what we were trying to achieve!

Right: 'Big Sky Country' – the Kielder landscape





Above: Kielder is full of historical and archaeological interest, yet to be interpreted  
Below: The courtyard and artwork at Kielder Castle, a former hunting lodge

The principles of development at Kielder are based upon the premise that visitors will experience the complete Kielder environment. By taking a site wide approach instead of looking at individual component parts and operators, a strategic, integrated visitor management and interpretation scheme has emerged.

### Water at every opportunity

The final document contains a comprehensive series of recommendations and we have selected the key aspects to briefly describe below.

The future plan is to ensure that visitors are reassured of their arrival at Kielder (usually after a fairly long drive) with welcome signage and a dramatic artwork that is a fitting counterpoint to the huge structure of the dam. There will be a visitor facility that will perform an important gateway and orientation function. This will introduce the landscape and all that it offers with the opportunity to create and book a personal itinerary for the day. This facility will also operate as a transport hub with a 'park and go' approach strongly encouraged so that visitors can leave their cars for the day and explore on foot, bicycle, and horse or shuttle bus.

Water will be a key focus for activities and

interpretation. Investment in infrastructure around the lake will offer a circular route and better access via footpaths to the lakeside. Most excitingly and ambitiously, the plan is to create a new footbridge as part of the art and architecture programme to link the lake perimeter walks.

Interpretation about and involving water will be extensive. New interpretive viewpoints (complementing current art pieces) will be created that invite visitors to look more closely at the landscape and understand its hidden past, for example the extensive archaeological remains that include early cairns and standing stones and the drowned village under the reservoir. Kielder's rich social history and tradition, evident through local place and family names will be interpreted through guided walks, in an audio commentary on the ferry boat and in graphic form as leaflets and on the website.

At Bakethin Reservoir the focus will be on wildlife in, on and around the water and a ranger is already working with schools and special interest groups. Near to Bakethin is Kielder Castle, a former hunting lodge converted to a visitor centre by Forest Enterprise and here there is the opportunity to provide interpretation through simple interactive



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Above: Cat Cairn, with Skyspace in the foreground and the lake to the centre  
Below: Interpretation will provide insight into the landscape from current and new viewpoints

and sensory displays. These will feature wild birds of prey, particularly goshawks, and can be linked to exterior features such as timber walkways and wildlife play habitats.

**Interpretation is forecast to be wet, wet, wet**

At another site close to the water's edge there will be an opportunity to interact with water, whatever the weather. A watery play area that takes its inspiration from the management of water from rain clouds and stream to household taps, via the reservoir, will explain a complex 'corporate' story through play. Water squirts, pipes, water balances, chutes and a myriad of other features will give children every chance to do what they all dream of – deliberately get really wet. Supporting simple graphics will provide key messages about the importance of water in the landscape and to our everyday lives, presenting a chance for families to learn together in their leisure time.

A large water maze (using pressure activated stepping stones) adds another dimension and will be designed as a 'quest' with a central feature that

may be a waterfall or cascade. Here, the story of the creation of Kielder Water through the maze and various route options can be told. Successful arrival at the central feature may reveal the source of Kielder's water, thus linking to the river and the wider landscape.

The art programme at Kielder has already led to the creation of a popular trail with bronze relief images that provide a collection of rubbings in a special booklet. A second trail is proposed on another lakeside peninsula that will use local stories and the extensive folklore of the area to create a walk with a purpose. Sculptural elements and new environments that provide visitor interactivity is envisaged inspired by local features. The 'mystery trail' is intended to reinforce Kielder's sense of magic and to emphasise the elements of water, wood and stone, their importance to life at Kielder, its history, and the key to its future.

The Partnership's interpretive aims for Kielder are to emulate the ethos of Turrell's masterpiece, which sits at the highest point in the landscape, superbly crafted from stone, providing a circular chamber within which one can contemplate the ever-changing light and cloudscape through a ceiling aperture. The human hand has created a means by which everyone can be drawn into and engage with the essence that is Kielder.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see [www.Kielder.org/art/skysp.htm](http://www.Kielder.org/art/skysp.htm)

<sup>2</sup> AHI Journal Spring 05 Volume 10 Number 1