

"Land of brown heath and shaggy wood; Land of the mountain and the flood."

International Ranger Federation 5th World Congress University of Stirling, Scotland, June 2006

The following is an account of the enthusiasm and friendship that made the 5th World Ranger Congress so memorable and a pleasure to recall. There were lots of colour - the irrepressible CMA/SCRA volunteers wore bright purple shirts, Congolese Rangers' widows had sent bush shirts in bright vibrant colours to be raffled and these caught the eye at main reception, as did so many full colour poster displays and publications and of course, copious colourful characters.

Opening moves

The skirl of the pipes atop Stirling Castle welcomed 300 delegates from over 40 countries to the 5th World Ranger Congress, transported there in double decker buses to the delight of our US ranger colleagues. The opening ceremony at the castle set the scene for the rest of the week with top quality speakers addressing delegates in the state-of-the-art Congress auditorium alternating with field visits to look at issues on the ground in a range of countryside and urban parks.

The Congress was off to a great start. People were chatting away and the banter was well up to the expected standard. Every morning breakfast (the full Scottish sort) saw delegates meeting and greeting, and reading the daily Congress newspaper ably produced by CMA members Janice Burley and Steve Peach. Then the post-breakfast raffle in the main auditorium ensured a prompt start to the day, followed by a varied days programme of lectures and activities.

The "CMA" Day

The overall Congress theme was "People & Place – the natural Connection". Thursday was "People" focused; Friday was "Place" with a series of full day site visits on Saturday. Sunday was the "Connections" day which had been planned and organised by a CMA team.

Session chair for the day was one of our patrons, Professor Chris Baines. He spoke in crusading style urging us to rebuild the relationships between people and our life support mechanisms. He recognised that we are now becoming aware of our impact but historically we have not managed resources well. The world is becoming urban and in urban areas the relationship between people and nature has to be absolutely right (one in every hundred people on earth live in Britain). His statement that the UK spends more per year on Prozac than on greenspace said it all. Our politicians remain un-persuaded that environmental education is a priority spend. We must urgently enable urban areas to deliver high environmental benefit. Efforts must be made to raise the kudos and value of environmental career paths and to provide enough 'countryside' staff to keep urban populations in touch with their environment. Chris highlighted the 'Breathing Places' campaign (an exciting collaboration between the BBC and numerous partner organisations that have a wealth of knowledge about wildlife and conservation) as one key way to deliver.

Next up was the keynote speaker Hans Kampf , who outlined a 'go getters' approach to creating, conserving and linking wild spaces as used in his role as Senior Policy Advisor to the Netherlands Government. Hans' philosophy was 'just go ahead and do it, it can and must be

done'. The presentations by invited speakers and grass-roots rangers just didn't stop coming on this "Connections" day, with its theme of 'Heal the Land – Heal the People'. Tea, coffee and meal breaks saw the exchange of information flow unabated. In the evening a series of informal presentations by delegates pushed more images of gorgeous landscapes under our noses.

The shirt off your back?

A continuous Congress strand was the phenomenal amount of 'shirt swapping'. Shirts were being sold, raffled and traded. 'I'll do you a St Lucia Anti Poaching Unit for a SCRA navy polo, old logo.' Did anyone end a day still wearing the same shirt they went down to breakfast in?

Workshops were the order of the day on Monday. These of course followed another rousing and raucous post breakfast raffle led by various happy extroverts. I then spent a very happy morning on a wooded hillside below the Wallace Monument in the company of the Danish Rangers Association who were demonstrating their take on 'Heritage Interpretation as a tool to promote sustainable development'. In a gloriously 'hands on' session we cooked pancakes over an open fire, whittled wooden spoons/spatulas ('spootulas?') and probed anything we could with electronic temperature and humidity readers. On arrival back at the campus I sat in on a workshop on 'Care and Feeding a Volunteer Programme' in Parks in New Mexico. After this I found a workshop on the efforts to conserve Congo's mountain gorilla's via Ranger action and heard lively discussion about the best ways to ensure that funds raised outside that country actually got to those doing the dangerous work on the ground. Hearing this really brought it home that Britain was unable to keep its larger wild mammals and now the fight is really on to protect these creatures worldwide.

The next workshop was on Scotland's 'Big Tree Country' initiative. The Forestry Commission and the Countryside Trust have joined forces to push the Forest Education Initiative concept and to run a 'Woodland Bus' that visits schools to educate about trees and woodland and to link with later site visits. Where else could you experience such variety and gain such valuable knowledge in one day?

A formal dinner ended the day. Folk in full dress uniforms or best togs appeared. Dried fish, liquorice and glasses of schnapps were offered to the delegates as they entered the room courtesy of the Icelandic Rangers who were attending Congress en masse - and mostly female! The dinner itself featured the organised mayhem of another raffle, in aid of the dependents of rangers injured or killed while on duty. Handsome sums were paid for sundry lots, which included a Polish full dress Ranger uniform, a US National Park Ranger wide brim hat straight out of Jellystone National Park and the Congress t-shirt signed by most delegates. The Danes seemed especially flush and bought a few things for large sums. I have a hazy memory of Tim Snow (Game Rangers Association of Africa) playing the bagpipes (did this really happen?), the Icelanders singing in close harmony and Roger Cole allowing me to sample a stash of 'rocket fuel' he had acquired from some of the East Europeans that CMA had sponsored, I don't seem to remember much after that!

Anything under your kilt?

Tuesday was devoted to IRF business – reports from the president, David Zeller, welcoming new Ranger Associations as members and electing a new international executive committee. A decision was made to host an interim "European Rangers Congress" in September 2007 in Eastern Europe. The 5th Congress drew to a close on Wednesday 21st June with a ceilidh, featuring at least 20 overseas rangers dressed in kilts including, from Kyrgystan, the CMA funded delegate - Ulan (or MacUlan as he's now called).

There was for most people I'm sure a bittersweet feeling that such a gathering had to end. To offset the sorrow of parting was the knowledge that thanks to a Congress so well organised and run by SCRA and CMA, all delegates were taking more knowledge and renewed commitment back to their far-flung workplaces. The 6th. World Ranger Congress in Bolivia

(2009) beckons and anyone who was at the 5th. Congress must have been sufficiently enthused and impressed to put the date in their diary. I know I have!

Neil Lister

CMA Editorial Team and "Special Correspondent" for RANGER magazine.