

Isle of Coll A Dark-sky Island

2018 Annual Report
International Dark-sky Association

Isle of Coll Community A Dark Sky Island

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As a condition of the continued accreditation of International Dark Sky Places, IDA asks that each Place submit a report on activities related to dark skies by 1 October of each year. This condition is set forth in the program guidelines for each of the Dark Sky Places designation categories

Annual reports are an opportunity for IDA to formally check in with Dark Sky Places and to gauge the health of our mutual relationship. The reports are also a chance to provide feedback on the program and make any suggestions you may have for improvements.

Queries about this report should be addressed to:

Tony Oliver
Comraich
Isle of Coll
PA78 6TB
UK
tony@colldigital.co.uk
+44 1879 230546

and

Julie Oliphant
The Coll Hotel
Arinagour
Isle of Coll
PA78 6SZ
UK
info@collhotel.co.uk
+44 1879 230334

The Isle of Coll, The Inner Hebrides, Scotland

Coll is a small, low lying island some 5 kilometres west of the Isle of Mull and 6 kilometres south west of Ardnamurchan Point, the most westerly part of UK's mainland. The island is approximately 21 kilometres by 5 kilometres and is fairly central in the coastal chain of Hebridean islands, offering breathtaking views of the surrounding islands.

The highest point on Coll is Ben Hogh in the south west of the island, which rises to a height of 104 metres (341 ft).

The Isle of Coll lies 56.66 degrees north and as such has considerably longer daylight hours in the summer than most parts of the UK, particularly England and Wales. Mid summer there can be almost no darkness, however, in winter, the Isle of Coll has considerably longer dark hours making sky viewing even more exciting. In the depths of winter daylight hours are short, approximately 09:00 hrs to 15:30 hrs.

The island is well known for its sandy beaches, 23 in all, large sand dunes and a rather dull but noisy little bird called the corncrake (*crex crex*).

The island has one village, Arinagour, which houses all the island's amenities and is just 1 kilometre from the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry terminal where daily (summer) ferries connect with the mainland and the neighbouring Isle of Tiree. In the winter there are just five ferries per week. There is an airport in the S.W. of Coll with scheduled flights to Oban and Tiree on Mondays and Wednesdays. The runway is unlit.

Coll is an incredibly dark place in winter assisted by the small volume of island vehicular traffic and the fact that there is no street lighting. Aurorae Borealis are often seen during these periods.

Isle of Coll and Tourism

The Isle of Coll has a population of approximately 170 full time residents and as such has little in the way of formalised committee infrastructure. There is a Community Council together with various groups of interested parties who form working groups as deemed necessary. As such there is no formalised 'Dark Sky' committee just a collection of like minded people with a similar goal who convene as necessary.

Tourism on Coll is relatively low key. There is only one hotel, one guest house, one hostel and one 'outdoor centre' organisation offering group accommodation, other than property letting. The island has one camp site but many enjoy wild camping as allowed in the Scottish wilderness. The lack of beds ensures Coll's accommodation is usually full in the summer months.

Despite this, Coll is always relatively quiet and one can usually have a beach all to oneself, even on a bank holiday. If you find someone else on your beach you can always try the next one!

Coll, being close to the neighbouring Isle of Tiree, often shares visitors who 'do' both islands in one trip. Tiree has a considerably larger population (800) and infrastructure than Coll and can accommodate relatively large influxes of visitors. Coll tourists are usually considered to be niche, coming for positive and often unusual reasons; rare plants, insects, birds, castles, Celtic history and more recently for Dark Sky viewing. Coll's tourist infrastructure is, therefore, ideally suited for Dark Sky visitors.

Coll has no tourist information centre or facilities for attracting visitors other than an island based web site (visitcoll.co.uk) and a leaflet produced by island talent.

The reputation Coll enjoys is one quite envied in the Hebrides, the island hotel winning awards for both accommodation and food over many years. This is helped considerably by Coll residents' appreciation for the quality of food produced, farmed and fished on and around the island. Although the number of accommodation providers is small, many more families benefit from tourism since so much produce used in supporting tourism is sourced from the island.

Scotland's reputation, and in particular the Western Isles, for wet and wild weather is considerable, yet the Isle of Coll, being at the westerly fringes and low lying, enjoys more clear days, and clear nights, than most parts of the highlands or the hillier islands such as Mull, Rum and Skye. This makes Coll an ideal location for viewing winter skies and in particular, due to the lack of ambient light, the Aurora Borealis.

Due to its northerly position, dark skies will not be a feature of mid summer and our skies only start to become dark again in mid to late August. The wonders of Coll's dark skies is an off season phenomenon.

2018 update

The IDA make suggestions for Annual Report topics and these have been taken as the basis of our report. Each topic is covered, as follows:-

- *Current information for the site IDA contact(s)*

Tony Oliver
Comraich
Isle of Coll
PA78 6TB
UK
tony@colldigital.co.uk
+44 1879 230546

Olvin Smith
Kilbride
Isle of Coll
PA78 6TB
UK
olvin@btinternet.com
+44 1879 230359

Julie Oliphant
The Coll Hotel
Arinagour
Isle of Coll
PA78 6SZ
UK
info@collhotel.co.uk
+44 1879 230334

Paula Smalley
Gordonlea
Arinagour
Isle of Coll
PA78 6SY
UK
enquiries@tighnamara.info
+44 1879 230319

- *Does the [Dark-sky] site currently have a Provisional status? If so, what work has been done in the past year to resolve concerns that resulted in the Provisional designation?*

The Isle of Coll site has full recognition

Lighting

- *Were any changes made to local/municipal outdoor lighting policy in the past year? If so, describe and include text of any code language added or changed.*

No, there have been no changes to Argyll and Bute Council's lighting policy and all new builds on the island have to submit an outdoor lighting plan and are, therefore, fully compliant. There have been two new builds completed in the last twelve months, in Arinagour village. Both comply with lighting requirements of the IDA.

- *Were there any new municipal lighting installations (or similar, large-scale installations on commercial property) built in the last year to show as examples built to your dark sky-friendly code?*

There has been no changes in the last twelve months.

Sky Quality

- *Were sky quality data taken in the past year? If possible, include a table or figure showing the information*

- *Did sky brightness increase over the previous year? Decrease?*
- *Is a permanently mounted sky monitor installed, or are there plans to install one?*

Olvin Smith took readings in the 2017/2018 winter and on January 2018 of the sky's darkness and reports he could see no change. Readings were within the range 20.66 and 21.64.

Funding

- *Currently administering any grants related to dark-skies programming? If so, describe.*
- *Were any new grants won this year?*
- *Are there plans to apply for any future grants?*

No funding/grants have ever been requested or received. This situation has not changed and is unlikely to change.

Arts and Culture

- *Is any programming ongoing or planned blending the arts/culture with dark skies? If so describe.*

There are no plans currently.

Outreach

- *Were any new programs begun this year?*
- *If so, are they complete or ongoing?*
- *Are statistics available (e.g., how many visitors served, donations, etc.)*

No new programs have been initiated this year. However, interest from special needs groups has continued and Care4carers (<http://www.care4carers.org.uk/>) have organised several week-end breaks for their carers to come to Coll, specifically on Stargazing activities.

Our Community Centre has organised regular weekend events they call "Coll and the Cosmos" which have all been well attended. Numbers are kept to a maximum of twenty and, so far, this number is nearly always reached. Visitors stay in on-island accommodation and this has developed into an increase in off-season business for Coll.

Because of the lack of any formalised tourist organisation on Coll, we can only estimate any effect on tourist numbers off-season that could be attributed to Dark-sky status. It is estimated that we have seen a 20% increase in visitor numbers during spring/Autumn compared to seven years ago. A part of this must be contributed to Dark-sky status.

Community and Media Relations

- *Any new media coverage you would like us to know about? May include e.g., PDFs as attachments*
- *Any engagement with local governments, community organizations, or private landowners in the past year to report?*

More information about the island's Dark-sky can be found at <http://darkskecoll.co.uk>.

Coll's Dark Sky Facebook page has increased to 650 likes.

Since the island's designation, the community has been inspired to take more interest in our dark sky with many more telescopes in regular use. There is an increasing number of organisations, such as CalMac Ferries who serve the Hebridean islands, advertising our Dark-sky status in their brochures and websites. Hopefully, this too will increase off-season tourist and awareness.

The Coll Dark Sky Group,
September 2018