

Transcript – The future of mountain regions – International Mountain Day 2020

Host: John McLuckie

Guest Speakers: Leonie Schulz, Mike Pescod

John McLuckie: 0:16

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands Careers and Employability Centre. In this episode, to mark International Mountain Day 2020, we'll be talking to Leonie Schulz, PhD student at UHI's Centre for Mountain Studies and Mike Pescod, Mountain guide and instructor at the School of Adventure Studies at West Highland College UHI, about the future of mountain regions with a focus on the Highlands. My name is John McLuckie and I'm joined today by Leonie Schulz and Mike Pescod, welcome both to the podcast.

Leonie Schulz: 0:47

Yeah, good morning. Thanks for having me today.

Mike Pescod: 0:50

Thank you very much.

John McLuckie: 0:51

Can I start by asking you both to tell us a bit about your route into your current role?

Leonie Schulz: 0:55

Yeah sure. My name is Leonie, I'm originally from Germany, but I've lived and studied and worked in lots of different countries including New Zealand, South Africa and the Netherlands. I've lived in Scotland for five years now and I initially moved here to complete my Master's in ecotourism. After completing my Master's, I started a job with a tour company and I was responsible for the online marketing, product management and I also worked as a tour guide. I was mainly doing the walking tours, which take people to different parts in Scotland, for longer and shorter walks around the countryside, and my favourite tour was called the Highlands and Islands tour. We would go to the Isle of Mull, the Isle of Skye, and to the Western Highlands. The job was a good balance between office work and outdoors work and I particularly enjoyed meeting lots of new people and taking them to some of the most beautiful parts of Scotland. But I really wanted to go back to doing research in my field and started looking for PhD projects that are relevant to my field. I'm now in my final year of doing my PhD. My PhD study looks at the distribution of outdoor activities in the Cairngorms National Park and how the distribution will potentially be affected by the A9 dualling. The A9 road is currently being expanded from one to two lanes in each direction between Perth and Inverness and is intended to be completed by 2025. The aim of the A9 dualling project is to improve travel times, road safety, reliability and also accessibility to the Highlands. It is also intended to improve the economic growth in the Highlands and it is expected that the A9 dualling will increase

visitor numbers in the Cairngorms National Park. Now the Cairngorms is one of Scotland's most popular areas for all sorts of outdoor activities. The relatively easy accessibility to the mountains makes this a great destination for many types of visitors. But at the same time, there are also some of the most sensitive sites such as the Cairngorm plateau and the Caledonian pine forest with its critically endangered inhabitants, the Capercaillie. The Capercaillie is the world's largest grouse species, only just over 1000 Capercaillie survive in the UK, mainly in the Cairngorms National Park. The high intensity of outdoor activities can have a negative impact on the nesting success of this sensitive bird and more visitors in the future will have more disturbance. Therefore, the main aim of my PhD is to identify how sensitive sites could be better protected from recreational disturbances in the future.

Mike Pescod: 3:30

So, I've been a mountain guide for 20 years now, well running my own business for 20 years. And I just absolutely love it. I'm still inspired to do, I still want to do it, it's the only thing that I want to do so I'm very grateful and lucky that you know, I've chosen a good career path for me. It's not for everybody, there's no doubt about that. But for me, it's working great. So I'm based out of Fort William. I live and work here for most of the year, occasionally I go off to the Alps in the summer months, just for a couple of weeks at the moment, and I might go back and do more Alpine stuff in the summer. But, basically I'm here, running trips up Ben Nevis, going to Glencoe, a little bit further afield sometimes, I go off to Skye and up to the Northwest Highlands, and Old Man of Hoy, you know, that kind of thing. It's a full time job for me and has been for the 20 years that I've been running the business. Before that, I had a pivotal moment when I was 17. Looking at university courses, I knew I wanted a degree. The question was what degree to go and do, so I was all set to go and do engineering. I was going to do aeronautical engineering because I always made these paper aeroplanes that flew and my Dad said, 'Oh, you're going to be an engineer, you're going to be an aeronautical engineer, you're going to build aeroplanes'. And it's a cool thing. As a kid, getting to design aeroplanes, it'll be fantastic. And I had filled in all forms for the aeronautical engineering courses, sealed them in the envelope and I was literally about to drop it into the post box, when I had a second thought, I kind of went, 'I'm not sure about this, just not sure,' and I already knew I wanted to be outside doing something. So, I changed completely. Let's go off and do something outdoors. I didn't know what exactly. I think I had some kind of fanciful notion of leading expeditions through the jungle in Borneo, and finding volcanoes in South America and walking up those, that kind of thing. But whatever it was, I knew I wanted to be outdoors. So I looked around and found this degree course gave me a step in that direction it was a Sport Science degree at Birmingham University. I chose Birmingham because they've got their own outdoor centre in the Lake District. So that really steered me into this direction and that course really helped me. UHI has got these amazing adventure tourism degrees now which is just perfect. That's exactly what I wanted to find back then. But it wasn't there, didn't exist, so I made the best of it. I've got to work with Libby Peters, through the University of Birmingham who's a mountain guide, she's based in Wales. I saw Libby and I thought, that's what I want to be, a mountain guide, that's it, what she does. And that was it, decided mountain guide, that was the path. 10 years later I got my qualification, takes quite a long time, and within that I moved away from Birmingham, I came up to Scotland, mostly for the pre requirements, you need a huge range of experience to get on and progress through the mountain guides' qualifications. So I'd already moved up here, was living up here, doing various temporary jobs, cutting grass on the campsite, selling bacon rolls at the ski area at Nevis Range to help me through the system. And I landed a job at Outward Bound for two years, which is great, and

really helped me with lots of interpersonal skills, and how to relate to people and look after them better in these extreme environments. And that led directly into me setting up my business, which I've done for 20 years.

John McLuckie: 6:27

Fantastic, two very different sets of experiences and career journeys there. The United Nations has designated December 11th 2020 as International Mountain Day. In your opinion, why is it important to highlight the significance of mountains?

Mike Pescod: 6:41

Well, they impact us in so many different ways. Here in Fort William, we're surrounded by mountains, and they impact us actually in a relatively subtle way. Most people I think, that are born and bred in Fort William don't really realise what they've got here and why it's so important. But the landscape here, the mountains, they give us work, there's lots of different types of work that you can get that rely on the mountains here. I'm talking from renewable energy sources to land management to what I do, and tourism in all forms. Tourism is the biggest employer in this area. So without the mountains, we wouldn't have that level of tourism. So just about every single job in this area relies on the mountains that are round about us. But it's not just employment, for us living here, this is our exercise, this is our way to live, active, healthy lifestyle. This gives us the inspiration to get out and go walking and engage in nature in this wild, brilliant landscape and to be able to get out into that environment from my door here is just brilliant. It's absolutely brilliant for exercise for inspiration for living active, healthy lifestyles, but also to get away from day to day life. I often say to folks, it's like meditation. When you go climbing, you don't think about your electricity bill or your mortgage or your job, you are solely engaged in what you're doing, especially if it's quite challenging. If you go up on a winter day, or if you go climbing, you've got no space in your head for thinking about other things, you're totally focused on the one little bit in front of you. And it takes all day, it's hours away from all of those normal kind of things that give you anxiety and stress in your day to day life. So you've got this complete physical break and you get this mental break as well, so you come back knackered, but mentally refreshed, and stimulated and ready to go again. And that's right here on our doorsteps. It's so valuable.

Leonie Schulz: 8:25

The demand for outdoor tourism and recreation, especially this year has definitely increased. We've seen a major growth in hill walking, and all different sorts of outdoor activities. So the mountains are certainly an important recreational resource. Being outdoors such as in the mountains, has also proven to enhance our physical and mental well-being. Mountains are a great way to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life, and they offer the best of views, but mountains are more than that. Half of the world's biodiversity hotspots lie in mountain areas. Lots of plant, animal and fungi species can be found in the mountains. Many of them are endemic to a particular mountain area, which means they can only be found there and nowhere else. So many species in mountain areas have evolved in different ways isolated by geographic and climatic barriers. When I lived in South Africa, I was amazed by the fact that the Table Mountain has as many plant species as the whole of the United Kingdom and about 70% of those plant species can only be found there on the top of the

mountain overlooking Cape Town. Due to this great biodiversity, mountains also have a high agricultural value. Large varieties of fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, grains, and fungi grow in the mountains. The most popular vegetables and fruit that we grow in the UK today originate from mountain areas such as potatoes and tomatoes. For mountain communities, the economic value of mountains play a major role too of course. Alongside the income from agricultural produce, mountain tourism and ecotourism are important economic sectors, from adventure sports agents to botanists, there are many jobs that rely on the mountains.

John McLuckie: 10:12

Really interesting points from both of you and I guess leading on from talking about the significance of mountains, what do you think are the major factors that are affecting mountain regions today?

Leonie Schulz: 10:20

I think there are many threats that our mountains have to face today and most of them are directly related to how we use the mountains to our advantage. Going back to my PhD study, which I talked about in the beginning, mountain activities can have major impacts on the biodiversity of mountain regions, if not managed sustainably. Recreational infrastructure such as ski lifts and slopes, as well as hiking and mountain biking trails have an impact on how animals use the area as well as on their reproduction. In some areas, recreational infrastructure and disturbance can significantly decrease the habitat of wildlife species. In Scotland this has major impacts on wildlife species that are dependent on for example, the Caledonian pine forests. This is because the available habitat is currently not enough to support both high intensity and widely distributed outdoor activities, as well as larger numbers of for example Capercaillie. Similarly, the increasing number of people visiting the Cairngorms plateau, decreases the undisturbed areas for wildlife species such as Ptarmigan and Dotter. In the worst-case scenario, it can lead to declines in populations of sensitive wildlife species. Now, the right to roam in Scotland is amazing, but responsibility is very important when it comes to protecting the environment that we have come to enjoy. That means, for example, that we do not leave trails unnecessarily because trails have been designed so that recreationists do not enter the most sensitive areas. And for example, that we do not light fires or let dogs off leads in, for example, ground nesting bird areas. Unsustainable farming practices also have major threats to our mountains that can lead to loss of habitat availability for wildlife species and also in turn a loss of biodiversity. Of course, the biggest factor that affects us and mountain regions alike is climate change. Less reliable snow cover leads to declining winter sports and will have an effect on the local economies which depend on the income of winter recreationists. Climate change has also led to an increase in natural disasters, ecosystem degradation and fragile environments. If mountain communities lose their livelihoods and abandon their cultural practices and ancient traditions, the loss of biodiversity will be accelerated. Therefore, it is important that climate change is on the top of the agenda of governments around the world.

Mike Pescod: 12:57

In terms of what I do, probably just the pressure of lots of people. The number of people just walking up Ben Nevis has gone up massively over the last 10 years. You know, it was about 40 or 50,000 people went up and down Ben Nevis 10 years ago, we're now at 140,000. The obvious

impact is on the path, we've just spent nearly a million pounds on the lower half of the path and it's now up to scratch, and the previous time it would have been completely engineered was in the mid-80s. A million pounds every 30 years is actually quite a lot of money and there's the immediate impacts, but also there's all the other impacts. This year we've had very different visitors, we've had more people here who don't have the experience in how to engage, how to go camping, how to go walking, and how not to have that impact. There's been lots of irresponsible use of Glen Nevis and Ben Nevis and that results in camper vans in the wrong place, emptying waste disposal, rubbish in lots of places, camp fires, tents, which is such a shame. But that's the kind of impacts that we need to mitigate against, and a lot of that is education. We need to engage with the people I think at a really early age. I think we need to get schoolchildren being educated, not just outdoors as in outdoor education, like we think of it, you know, going away to a centre and doing kayaking and canoeing and walking. Yes, we need that, that's brilliant. But, also regular education needs to be outside. So, at school, I think every day the class would be going out to the playing field or to anywhere outside just to do regular subjects. And not only will that stimulate them into a better learning environment, but also they'll learn how to interact with the outdoors, just in a low key way. It'll become normal that you need to wear the appropriate stuff, not drop your litter, and not chop down trees and break twigs off, so it's pretty basic stuff at that early age. So that then goes all the way through to when these people are adults, they already know how to behave when they're outdoors, which we want them to do. So there's a lot of education that needs to be done, including of the current adults who want to engage in this kind of stuff. The Outdoor Access Code is brilliant, but it just needs to be used a lot better in terms of educating, getting people to behave much better. If we were able to spread out a bit more that'd be great. So I think there's a job for us to do with looking after the mountains, which is to try and sell other areas. There's more than Ben Nevis, you know, we still get people on the phone saying, 'I want to come for a walk and I think Ben Nevis is too much for me, is there something else that I can do?' and I think 'Is there?', there's the whole of the Highlands', so, it's just that people don't know what else there is to do. So, if we can just steer people to do other things, go to other areas, spread that impact around, it'll be much more manageable.

John McLuckie: 15:34

It's fascinating to consider that many of the different impacts on mountain regions at a local level apply equally on a global scale. Just to look at the regional context, do you think the current discussion on land reform in Scotland will have an impact on what mountain areas in the Highlands and Islands might look like in the future?

Mike Pescod: 15:50

I must admit I'm not completely up to speed with where the discussion is at, at the moment, but community ownership, for example, of large areas of land, I think has got to be a way forward. We're disconnected at the moment that leads into how we behave in the outdoors. Especially if you're not surrounded by this kind of landscape, how on earth can you be connected with nature and wild places and fundamentally, I think that connection is so important for all of us on a personal level and on a community society level. In a global climate emergency we need to restore our upland peat bogs, we need to stop the reduction in biodiversity, we need trees back and to do much of that we need to reduce the impacts of overgrazing mostly from deer. So we need to shoot deer, it's fairly

simple, but at the moment, the common perception of deer management, deer stalking is rich people coming from the States or Russia, or from England, spending an awful lot of money to go and shoot deer as a kind of trophy hunting thing. Or we think of hunting, as in Americans going into the forest and shooting each other and that's not good either. Now, there's other ways of doing it and there's much better, more positive ways of thinking about this, which we don't have because we don't do it. We as in the general population, we just don't know anything about it. In Sweden and in Norway it's different. It's a significant proportion, like 20% of the population goes hunting. I've changed on this completely in the last couple of years, because I've only just learned about it. So we need to go and shoot deer and if the deer management was done by the community, people here who had made that connection. If we could then have a positive impact on the deer, and what's growing in our hills in terms of the trees and the bushes and the biodiversity, if we see a positive impact, we'll start to feel good about that, to have pride in what we're doing in our landscape. This isn't just me thinking of random stuff. This is exactly what's happened in Norway, there are areas where 50 years ago, there were no trees, very bad biodiversity, and it's down to the impacts of deer management. The community now have been managing the deer for 50 years, and there's pride in that community. In not only what grows there, but pride in the quality of the deer. Because they're healthy, they've got enough food, they've got enough shelter, their weight is up there, they're good quality deer. And the community has made that happen. I mean, that's just amazing, that connection between the two. So, I want to go in that direction and I think community ownership of land is a real key part of that.

Leonie Schulz: 18:09

I definitely think that it is important to improve Scotland's system of land ownership and the rights and responsibilities of access to land. Coming from a different political and cultural background, it was foreign to me that so much land is in the hands of such a small number of people, even in the national parks. And it was also a strange concept to me that such a large proportion of Scotland's land in the Highlands and the Southern Uplands is managed for grouse shooting. From what I've learned since living in Scotland, grouse shooting also seems to be one of the most controversial industries because such a huge amount of land, I heard half the size of Wales, is used for this exclusive activity, contributing a relatively low percentage to the overall economy. So yeah, I do think and hope that the current debate on Scotland's land reform will contribute to better and a more diverse pattern of land ownership, and that decision making of land use will take into account affected local communities. So hopefully the mountain areas will be managed in the best interest of Highland communities and the environment in the future. This will also mean a greater range in the number of economic and housing opportunities for rural communities. As climate change is a major threat to the mountain areas in the Highlands and Islands, I also hope that the land reform will advance to introduce more and stricter climate change measures, such as bogland restoration and reforestation. Most of Scotland's mountains and glens are treeless and my dream is to see more rewilding projects like Cairngorms Connect and Glen Affric.

John McLuckie: 19:54

Thanks very much for your perspectives there, it's certainly a hot topic. Would you have any advice for people who may be interested in pursuing a career that involves working with mountains?

Leonie Schulz: 20:04

I think if you left the mountains and would like to work in a mountain area, I think there are great career opportunities, whether you would like an outdoorsy job or an office with a mountain view, so to say. If you like the practical side of things, the School of Adventure Studies at West Highland College has some fantastic courses with a practical focus, such as the outdoor adventure, or outdoor leadership courses. If tour guiding sounds like a good option to you, it's important that you are a people person. It is great to be outdoors with a group of people teaching them about our natural environment, like I really, really enjoyed it, it's great, but you must not forget that it comes with a lot of responsibilities, such as looking after individual guest needs as well as group dynamics. Every group is different and has to be treated as such. If you're thinking about a management or research career, the Master's in Sustainable Mountain Development here at the Centre for Mountain Studies might be for you. The course deals with environmental and social issues in mountain areas, as well as sustainability and policies such as sustainable land use, renewable energy and sustainable tourism. Prior to this Master's, you would have to study for a Bachelor's for example in geography, management, environmental or social science. I think the job prospects for mountain areas will change quite a bit over the next decade as well, hopefully with a greater focus on sustainability and climate change. One of the results of my PhD study was that more rangers are needed to connect people with nature and teach them about nature conservation, and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. So a mountain ranger position would be a great career option if you're a people person, and would like to protect the environment. In any way, networking, I think is very, very important in any career you would like to pursue, for example, by going to different events and conferences. In the first year of my PhD, I went to a conference in Chamonix, near Mont Blanc, it was called the Sustainable Summits Conference. This year's event was due to be held in Nepal but was postponed because of the pandemic like probably most other conferences and big events. But in 2018, it was a great way for me to get in touch with people from all different industries and from all over the world, really. Conferences give you a great opportunity to connect with people and also to get inspired by what other people do.

John McLuckie: 22:38

Would you like to add any advice Mike?

Mike Pescod: 22:41

Yes, do it. Simple as that and there's so many options. Like when you think of what is a career in the mountains, well mountain guide comes up fairly quickly, I guess. But no there's so many different options, isn't there? There's a lot of work in renewable energy sources right now. So, wind farms and micro hydro schemes. There's a lot of people I know, that have been working for the last decade solely on these mini hydro schemes. And they're engineers and they're fabricators and they spend most of the days outside in the hills, putting in intakes and pipes and all sorts of stuff. So, if it wasn't for the mountains, you wouldn't have that line of work. There's industrial and fabricating roles that you could go and pursue, as well as, yes, all the tourism things. And that could be anything, that could be taking photos, tours around low key places through to what I do, which is, higher end ice climbing, which isn't for everybody, absolutely. But there's such a range of things to do in the mountains. So why not absolutely go and get stuck in, yes, do it.

John McLuckie: 23:37

Fantastic advice there, thanks very much. I guess as a final question, do you have anything planned to mark International Mountain Day 2020?

Mike Pescod: 23:45

I don't know about the School of Adventure Studies. At the moment, I think we're just kind of trying to deliver what we normally deliver but in a very strange way because of Covid. That's taken a lot of thought and a lot of work. But what I do know is that in the graduation, and to mark an anniversary of West Highland College, we are initiating making a forest. We're going to plant trees in Glen Nevis, and at other UHI centres around the west coast. We're going to be planting trees not just once but as an ongoing thing, so that we'll create a forest in Glen Nevis over the years, over the decades, and it might well be just as personal as linking particular parts of that to graduates and different year groups, so that these graduates come out knowing not only have they done really well and got a degree, but they've had something to do with the reforestation of Glen Nevis, which they'll see grow. They'll come back in 10 years, 20 years, 50 years' time to a mature forest of Scots pine trees, wouldn't that be amazing.

Leonie Schulz: 24:38

Usually we get together for tea and coffee in our office at Perth College, also to discuss certain issues. This unfortunately is impossible this year, so we will probably just put something up on social media to highlight the significance of mountains. We do have a Twitter and Facebook account linked to the Centre for Mountain Studies. So yeah, keep an eye out for them.

John McLuckie: 25:00

Leonie Schulz and Mike Pescod, thanks very much to you both for taking part in the podcast, it's been fascinating talking to you.

Leonie Schulz: 25:06

Yeah, thank you very much for having me. It's been really nice chatting to you this morning.

Mike Pescod: 25:11

You're welcome, good fun. I like talking about mountains, any time.

John McLuckie: 25:14

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