

# **The Scottish Highland Games: Evolution, Development and Role as a Community Event**

## **Abstract**

This article provides an in-depth review of the Highland Games as an event that has achieved worldwide recognition, staged not just in Scotland but across the globe where Scottish Diasporas exist although the focus here is on Scotland. Highland Games events are complex to categorise and conceptualise considering their multi-layered nature and scope, encompassing a multitude of activities each based on diverse local histories and traditions. The article commences with a detailed historical analysis of the Highland Games in Scotland to illustrate the distinctiveness and uniqueness of this type of event. A review of the event literature follows to illustrate the complexities and problems that conventional event typologies pose for seeking to classify or categorise the Highland Games, emphasising the community basis of such events as a starting point for understanding this phenomenon. The article reports the results of an empirical study of Highland Games events in Scotland and addresses a number of the current concerns and debates associated with the staging of Highland Games, including the challenges that non-profit Games organisations face in continuing the community tradition of event hosting. One particular issue that features is an acknowledgement of the dangers posed by the more commercial priorities of contemporary event management to the rich cultural heritage that underpins the Highland Games which could easily become neglected or even eradicated through more professional organisation.

**Keywords:** The Highland Games      Community Sporting Events  
Historical analysis      Scottish Diasporas      Scotland

## **Introduction**

The Scottish Highland Games is a traditional event that developed around 1820 (Grant, 1961; Jarvie, 1989, 1991), emerging as an important community event across Scotland. The event has achieved a high profile status in countries such as New Zealand, Canada and the USA becoming a cultural spectacle in local communities. One of the key drivers of the creation and continuity of these events that has helped to maintain their presence overseas is the global Diaspora of Scottish migrants who had a desire to keep Highland traditions, dress, culture and music alive. The cultural contribution made by Scots forced to emigrate in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries due to the Highland Clearances and other push factors such as poverty, a loss of traditional way of life and limited economic opportunities is often overlooked even although it has assisted in preserving the distant culture and heritage of the rural communities left behind or eradicated by land reform.

The relationship between tourism and sporting events (of which Highland Games might be broadly classified) has been widely studied in event and tourism literature (e.g. Higham 2005; Weed and Bull 2004) and the role of such events is often viewed as a major catalyst to local and national economic development. According to Getz (2008), the origins of event management now mark a shift from individual events and community initiatives, such as the Scottish Highland Games, to more professional and commercialised events run by event organisers as part of the wider professionalisation of the field. In this context, the Scottish Highland Games represent a legacy, if one accepts Getz's argument and reflect the ongoing role of local communities and volunteers in developing and showcasing their local heritage and community pride on an annual basis. This study will seek to understand the people who attend these events, the volunteer groups organising the events and how over the years some specific Games have evolved into major tourist attractions.<sup>1</sup> .

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<sup>1</sup> To be considered as a major event and tourist attraction is likely to give the Games a high profile and events like the Cowal Highland Gathering where the Cowal Pipe Band Championships ([www.cowalgathering.com](http://www.cowalgathering.com)) take place, or The Braemar Gathering normally attended by members of the Royal Family, and due to buying a house locally, a well-known

For this reason, this study seeks to provide the first comprehensive review of the Scottish Highland Games as a leisure event to understand their evolution and levels of visitation along with how they are organised and managed as the first stage of a long-term research programme to examine the Games as a leisure phenomenon in Scotland.

The purpose of this article is to address the current paucity of literature on the Highland Games being staged in Scotland. Most of the current literature focused on Scotland considers the social history and traditional aspects of Highland Games. Other research into the Highland Games phenomenon has been undertaken in the USA by authors such as Chhabra, Healy and Sills (2003), Chhabra, Sills and Cabbage (2003), Crane, Hamilton and Wilson (2004) and Ray (1998) which consider the Games from an American viewpoint mainly focused on heritage, authenticity, tartan symbolism and imagery and economic studies, although Ray has also conducted some qualitative research in Scotland. This study will seek to understand these events within a Scottish environment through studying the original structure, sustainability, size and scope of these events. However, it needs to be stressed that whilst the event literature may well have looked at these staged activities in the USA, this article is concerned with a number of issues that are not addressed or related to the literature in the USA. The authors do not consider it pertinent to deviate from the main focus of their study to simply cite literature which does not necessarily aid the analysis and direction of their arguments. Indeed, the article is Scotland focused and not a review of the cultural or sociological aspects of the Games as an event which appears in other studies. The main purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the evolution and analysis of the Games in Scotland as well as the way they are organised and managed and not to reiterate the research findings of North American studies which do have a direct parallel with the situation in Scotland on themes that are not the focus of this article.

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Scottish comedian has raised the profile of the Lonach Highland Gathering as he is known to invite film stars and celebrities to the Games as his guests.

This will assist in understanding why these events have a diverse range of forms and organisation and their impact on leisure activity patterns in Scotland, as these events form both a community-based leisure and tourism event. The article commences with a review of the evolution of the Highland Games to establish the social, historical and cultural context of these key events within Scotland. An historical review is critical to understanding how a contemporary event has strong roots in a community which has retained its cultural and social significance over a long period of time, despite commercial pressures. This is followed by a short contextualisation of the Highland Games as an event in a review of the relevant literature on leisure and community-based events, prior to discussing the research study and findings which seek to assess the scope and scale of these events at a pan-Scotland level. The article then draws upon a series of key findings to illustrate the significance and implications of the study for event development and provision. Within these contemporary concerns and given the importance of understanding the origin and evolution of these unique events, attention first turns to the historical development of the Highland Games.

## **The Highland Games: Their Evolution and Development**

### *The Origins of the Games*

It is difficult to accurately identify when or where the Highland Games originated, as virtually no documentary records exist (Webster, 1973; Jarvie, 1991) due to the fact that most information relating to Highland customs and traditions has been passed on to succeeding generations by word of mouth. One explanation of the Gaelic origin of the Games is that they were brought to Argyll in the West of Scotland by a race of people known as the 'Scotti' (Ray, 2001) who migrated from Northern Ireland between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. bringing with them an early form of athletics (Burnett, 2000; Nally, 1923; Redmond, 1982) known as the 'Tailteann Games'<sup>2</sup> which continued until around 1180 A.D.

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<sup>2</sup> Ancient sporting Games which originated in Ireland and took place for Queen Tailté, starting in 1829 B.C. and continued until around 1180 A.D. (Nally, 1923)

A popular explanation among historians is that the origin of the Games is considered to have taken place during the reign of King Malcolm of Canmore (1058-93) in the eleventh century when he organised a gathering at Braemar, in the Grampian region of Scotland, where clansmen competed in races with the winners chosen to be post runners to deliver messages on behalf of the king (Colquhoun and Machell, 1927; Jarvie, 1989, 1991; Webster, 1973) and to identify the strongest warriors who became the king's bodyguards. One further explanation is that following the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 the people of Bannockburn held a gathering to celebrate the victorious return of their fighters (Dunnett, 1998; Webster, 1973) which could have been the forerunner of the Games as practised today. Linked with military activities Grant (1961) and Webster (1973) indicate that some of these events were being established through young clansmen carrying out physical activities as they prepared for combat :

*“Highland youths, besides being trained to arms, ‘Used swimming, archery, football, throwing of the barr, fencing, dancing, wrestling and such manly sprightly exercises and recreations very fit for polishing and refining youth’,... ( Grant 1961: 344)*

### *The Highland Games: Geographical Origins*

Various accounts exist relating to the creation of the events which are included in current Highland Games and Gatherings with the main argument being that the events originated in rural areas. Informal events were already taking place within the agrarian environment (Jarvie, 1991; Airth Highland Games Committee, 1984) where country workers competed against each other using suitable implements they had to hand, in much the same way that agricultural fairs and events evolved through to the Victorian period (Mingay 1981). Many of the activities incorporated into these events were elements in their own right including hill running, throwing the stone and tossing the caber<sup>3</sup> (Jarvie, 1989). In rural areas these events were used to demonstrate feats of

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<sup>3</sup> An event where a tree trunk which has had the branches removed leaving a bare trunk is thrown upright by one man in an attempt to get the trunk called the caber to land at right angles to the ground

strength with competitions taking place between farmers or local teams, friendly rivalry which increased and strengthened social cohesion within different communities (Jarvie, 2000) and provided enjoyment for locals, visitors and competitors. As Webster (cited in Donaldson, 1986:10) indicated, 'Games were woven into the social fabric of country life'.

The origins of some of the activities within Highland Games such as tossing the caber, which is one of the main spectacles at contemporary games, are not easily defined with Grant (1961) and Jarvie (2000) agreeing that this activity originated from 'raising the couples', which was part of the method of building a traditional Highland house (couple is an old Scottish word for rafter). On the other hand Webster (1973) suggests that tossing the caber may have links with fertility rites and has been a part of the Highland Games from very early times, but also suggests that the people who worked in the woods created this sport in their leisure time. Colquhoun and Machell (1927) identify the heavy events (defined as trials of strength, such as throwing weights, hammer or stone and tossing the caber) as having emerged from the clansmen when in between their normal work of cattle stealing and tending sheep they utilised accessible items and tools to compete with each other. Traditionally these were feats of strength continued today as the heavy events with the competitors commonly referred to as 'heavies'.

#### *Diversity in the composition of the Highland Games*

For some the heavy events may be considered the epitome of Highland Games although other events have always been an integral part of Games such as hill running, dancing, wrestling, bagpipe music and sometimes Gaelic poetry recitals (Redmond, 1982), although Highland dancing was originally the domain of male dancers (Grant, 1961) and considered by Colquhoun and Machell (1927) as the main event in earlier Games. Athletic events such as track running, hill running and jumping both for distance and height, along with cycling and wrestling have been included at different times over the years although nowadays not all events take place at all Games. Novelty events have been recorded as taking place from a very early age and were thought

to have been introduced at different Games throughout the ages to attract larger attendances and to increase competitor numbers (Ray, 2001). These events include such activities as three legged races (Taynuilt Highland Games programme, 2006) and tilt the bucket (Dornoch Highland Games programme, 2006).

Some of the Games which take place today have their own unique events such as Taynuilt Highland Games where they have a heavy event called the 'Nant Stone' (Taynuilt Highland Games programme, 2006), Inverkeithing and Cupar have an event called 'De'il tak the hindmost' (Inverkeithing Highland Games programme, 2006 and Cupar Highland Games programme, 2007) which is a cycling event where the winner is the last person to cross the finish line, and Lewis Highland Games have a heavy lifting event called 'Clachan Thunga', or The Big Stones (Lewis Highland Games programme, 2006). These unique events have their origins buried deep in the past and are surrounded in folklore and legend.

#### *Establishing the contemporary Highland Games in the Georgian and Victorian period*

Following the 1745 Rebellion, around the 1760s it became obvious to a number of people that something had to be done to retain features of Scottish culture such as traditional music and dance (Webster (1973). Apart from the athletic events which are said to have taken place in the eleventh century it is generally agreed that the Games became established in the contemporary format based on an event which took place at Falkirk in 1781, organised by the St Filians Society (Donaldson, 1986; Jarvie, 1991; Webster, 1973) and included athletics, piping, dancing and heavy events. Since the 1820s the Highland Games have spread throughout Scotland with Games taking place not only in the Highlands but spreading to the Lowlands where events such as horse racing, novelty races and athletics were included (Burnett, 2001). The earliest Games documented took place at Braemar in 1817, St Filians in 1819 (Redmund, 1982) and Lonach in 1823, and although the St Filians event is no longer in existence Lonach and Braemar still hold annual events. The Games

were formally organised from around the 1820s and were similar in format in terms of activities and competitions which take place in the present day (Redmond, 1982) although from a social history point of view Jarvie (1989) suggests that the Games today are likely to have different values and meanings to their audience than in the past.

The Victorians attended Highland Games and gatherings as part of their social calendar bringing them into popularity (Dunnett, 1998), and were further popularised by the presence of Queen Victoria who made her first appearance at the Braemar Gathering in 1848 (Burnett, 2000; Colquhoun and Machell, 1927; Jarvie, 2000; Webster, 1973). As the Queen spent her time at Balmoral Castle, the phrase 'Balmoralisation' became used to describe the process of 'bonding or social link which was reproduced between the reigning monarchy, the Balmoral estate and the Braemar Royal Highland Gathering in particular but not exclusively' (Jarvie, 1989 p 200). To this day the Braemar Highland Gathering and the Royal British Legion of Mey Highland Games continue to enjoy royal patronage. By the 1940s, Webster (1973) notes that there were around 200 Games taking place in Scotland but as an example of their decline, by the new millennium, where once eight Games occurred annually within a ten mile radius in Aberdeenshire, only the two largest survive today indicating that in earlier years more Highland Games were in existence than today even with the introduction of recent events

#### *Organisation of the Highland Games in Scotland*

The growth of the Games in Scotland led to the creation of a specific professional organisation which has assisted with retaining the Games phenomenon in changing times. The Scottish Games Association (SGA) was formed in 1946 and is the organisation that oversees Highland Games events (Jarvie, 2000; Webster, 1973). As part of their policy the SGA states that:

*Highland Games have always been important as community events, but we are also now of pivotal value to the tourist industry. The SGA's members attract some 500,000 spectators annually,*

*many from overseas. Despite being so well known and fondly associated with Scotland, Highland Games do not receive government funding: the SGA and its members have to raise funds themselves and are run on a not-for-profit basis. (SGA, 2007).*

Strictly operated on an amateur basis, since its inception the SGA has formalised events by introducing standardised rules and policies and recording records set, as at an earlier time Colquhoun (1927) had observed that although some phenomenal feats of strength were taking place at Games, there was no official means of recording genuine records until this formalisation. A policy of drug testing was introduced in 1971 and the results at Championship events in Scotland as well as at British and World level are verified by the SGA (SGA Handbook, 2006).

As a governing body Jarvie (1991; 2000) states that the SGA has encouraged the Games to become more commercial and nationalistic through an increasing level of professionalisation and bureaucracy which has been increasing since 1910. Although the SGA did not evolve until 1946 Jarvie's argument suggests there was already a shift in attitude towards commercialisation as a vital part to the continuation and sustainability of the Games however Webster (1973) indicates that sponsorship of commercial companies is essential for the continuance of world championship events. Accordingly, to appreciate the nature and scope of Highland Games, along with the issues and challenges for the sector, it is now appropriate to turn to the perspectives that inform the understanding of events in a research context before an examination of empirical data on the Highland Games in Scotland.

### **Understanding the Highland Games as an Event: Research Perspectives**

Clearly, the role and significance of events has increased within the international tourism and leisure sectors in the last twenty years (see e.g. Bowdin et al., 2007; Getz, 1997). In the context of the wider literature on events, Daniels (2007) and Weed and Bull (2004) identify sports tourism, a form of event tourism in which the Highland Games might be considered, as an expanding and increasingly important phenomenon. Indeed, with more leisure pursuits becoming more accessible there is a greater opportunity to be

involved in activities and events either as a participant or a spectator and there are many which take place in unique locations with spectacular scenery (Derrett, 2004) to such an extent that people have been known to identify an event by its location. Developing a conceptualisation of the Highland Games as an event provides a useful mechanism in defining its nature and scope, in terms of how one might classify and describe the parameters of the event. Accordingly, the discussion now turns to defining and classifying the Highland Games with respect to the event literature, as a precursor to the empirical data and implications presented later in this paper.

### *Defining and Classifying Highland Games as an Event*

Within the diverse spectrum of events and festivals, a range of categories and typologies of events have emerged. At a basic level, Bowdin *et al.* (2007) suggest that characterising an event often depends on its size and scale and recognise major events, mega-events, hallmark events and local/community events, although they do acknowledge that not all events simply fit with a particular characterisation as there can be a tendency for characteristics to overlap. In a similar vein, Shone and Parry's (2004) categorisation of events include leisure events, cultural events and organisational events all of which could apply to Highland Games. Similarly, Getz's (2008) typology of events includes festivals, defined as themed public celebrations, and sports events where sporting activities occur and can take place at local, national or international level. In Getz's (1997) typology of events, cultural celebrations are artificially separated from sport competitions but combining the two assists in the classification of the Highland Games as an event. Further, a report commissioned by the Scottish Executive (DTZ, 2007) identifies the type of sporting events within Highland Games as indigenous minority sports activities in relation to communities in Scotland, thus emphasising the sport and cultural interface. However, Lothian (2001, p. 101) categorised Highland Games into four categories:

1. traditional Games: established either before or during the reign of Queen Victoria and where there is evidence of the folk origins (pre-1745) in the programme of events offered;

2. modern Games: established in the same era but the programme of events has expanded to include non-traditional events;
3. community tourism Games: established or re-established since 1970 by members of the local community with one of the objectives being to provide an event to attract tourists;
4. commercial tourism Games; established or re-established since 1985 in tourist areas and organised by a commercial operator.

Overall, the common themes in classifying the Highland Games as an event is that simultaneously it is a community-based event, a sporting event and cultural event, although it might depend upon the perspective of the participant or spectator as to which they identify with. This supports the notion that such events are extremely diverse and according to Watt (1998) contribute to event categories such as sporting competitions, celebrity appearances, band contests, Highland Games and Royal tournaments.

The diversity of activities taking place within a Highland Games setting does raise the question of what the sole purpose of the Games is: is it about the appearance of celebrities or royalty, particular types of sporting activity or competition such as dancing and Pipe Band contests? For example, the Braemar Highland Gathering is always attended by royalty and the Cowal Highland Gathering, which hosts the Cowal Pipe Band Championships, has international appeal. Both could equally be classified as hallmark events (Hall, 1992; Ritchie, 1984). The Highland Games in this context, fit with Ritchie's (1984, p2) definition of a hallmark event as "*...an event that possesses such significance, in terms of tradition, attractiveness, quality or publicity, that the event provides the host venue, community, or destination with a competitive advantage*" further complicating any specific categorisation of the Highland Games as an event given their incredible diversity and scale as will be demonstrated later.

There are many critics of the use and association of the Highland Games with tourism when arguably it spans a broad spectrum of types of event from community-based through to major tourism events such as the Braemar and Cowal events. Furthermore, as an event every Highland Games are unique in their locational setting, format, activities and competitions suggesting that seeking to model the diversity into simple categories would actually destroy any fundamental understanding we have of the unique and almost individualised nature of many of these events. To simply characterise Highland Games into a specific typology or classification is always going to create problems due to this rich diversity along with their own history and perspective of their rationale and role in their community. For this reason, the notion of the Highland Games as a combination of a community event and an attraction is a more helpful approach to understanding their rationale and modern day role in Scottish society which reflects their evolution in time and space.

*(i) Highland Games as a Community Event*

It is recognised by Daniels (2007), Dimmock and Tiyce, (2001), Shone and Parry (2004) and Getz (2008) that community sport events have a pivotal role in enhancing pride within the local community, although Daniels (2007) considers that the main motive for sport events is to encourage spending. In stark contrast, Dimmock and Tiyce (2001) indicate that the involvement of the community in celebrations of tradition and culture is a strong motivator and due to the uniqueness of events has added appeal to visitors who want to encounter an authentic cultural experience, to escape from every day life, be entertained and socialise (Getz, 2008). Bowdin *et al.*, (2007) agree that local or community events are primarily geared towards entertainment and socialisation for local residents and occur over a limited period of time (Dimmock and Tiyce, 2001). They also have the ability to re-unite families and friends on a social basis (Derrett, 2003) and to celebrate community values (O'Sullivan and Jackson, 2002) although Gursoy *et al.* (2003) note that these events are dependent on the enthusiasm of the organisers who work without professional aid with the aim of maintaining the spirit of the community.

Community events can also be implemented as a tool to raise funds to increase facilities within the community (Dimmock and Tiyce, 2001; Getz, 1997); although Highland Games are predominantly non-profit making organisations Lothian (2001) identifies that modern Games established in Scotland after the 1980s in Scotland may have been influenced by more commercial factors. As such, consideration of the Highland Games as a visitor attraction is a worthwhile area of discussion.

### *(ii) Events as Attractions*

Crompton and Mckay (1997) recognise that events are one of the fastest growing types of tourist attraction incorporating elements such as socialisation, culture and novelty. Events are considered to be tourist attractions if visitors remain in a specific area when an event is taking place (Getz, 1997) whereas Gursoy *et al.* (2003) consider festivals and special events as being 'unique travel attractions'. To promote an event as a tourist attraction requires financial assistance from public bodies although there is acknowledgement by Felsenstein and Fleischer (2003) that some events considered to be self-sustaining through ticket sales and income generated through sponsorship and patronage may be denied funding from public bodies. Without appealing to tourists, events cannot be referred to as tourist attractions according to McKercher *et al.*, (2006) who found that not everyone at a destination where an event was taking place was there purely to attend the event. It is reasonable to assume that a successful event will bring people to a specific area, a tool that can be utilised by marketers to promote a country or region as part of a destination marketing strategy. Yet McKercher *et al.* (2006) found that events are not tourist attractions for overseas visitors, even though they are increasingly being implemented as a tool to generate income to specific regions (Chhabra, 2004; Felsenstein and Fleischer, 2003; Gursoy *et al.* 2003). Although these events may help to preserve culture and tradition, Saleh and Ryan (1993) argue that there is the possibility that traditional and cultural events are likely to be threatened through commercialisation, a process which could lead to the 'commodification of tradition' (Lothian, 2001).. Within local community events the emphasis is on

the creation of an enjoyable social community-based event rather than economic benefits and locals may regard the commercialisation of an event a distraction from its main focus. These events face many organisational and management issues given their community-orientation and the way they have developed with volunteers and a committee structure vital to understanding their longevity as events.

*(iii) Combining Community Heritage with Contemporary Event Management*

Through enriching the visitor experience, heritage and cultural traditions can be used to promote rural areas (Ritchie, 1984; Getz, 1997) and as such events like the Highland Games can be used to promote iconic elements of Scotland's culture and heritage (DTZ, 2007). As Jarvie (2000) argues, Highland Games often appear in writings pertaining to sport activities which have assisted the promotion of an image of tartan, pipers and dancing to the rest of the world with such imagery having the potential to encourage visitors to these events (Getz, 2008). Ray (2000) states that tartan is known internationally as a symbol of Scotland even though Lothian (2001) recognised that the Scottish Tourist Board (now VisitScotland – Scotland's national tourism organisation) moved away from the use of tartan images in promotional literature in preference of landscape and scenery.

Meanwhile the Scottish Executive<sup>4</sup> recognises that Highland Games attract visitors and tourists not only from the UK but also from overseas where they provide an opportunity to participate at an event and enjoy part of Scotland's culture and heritage through competition and tartan imagery. However, VisitScotland's desire to move Scottish tourism promotion from a tired and over-used association with tartan has been notable, especially in domestic tourism promotion. In contrast, tartan represents a global brand associated with Scotland internationally (Ray, 1998) among overseas visitors and it provides a close association with the culture and people of Scotland in their ceremonial and performing roles, especially in relation to military traditions.

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<sup>4</sup> The Scottish Executive was re-named the Scottish Government in September 2007.

Arguably, the cultural and heritage origins of the Highland Games may not fit with the prevailing notion (e.g. DTZ, 2007) within the event literature that the Games need to be professionalised to such an extent that the core traditions are altered to appeal to a more commercial audience. As one of the most appealing attributes of Highland Games is their sense of tradition and uniqueness, moving their organisation and management to a template of professional best practice which is replicated across Scotland would be detrimental to the cultural and social roots of individual events. To professionalise the event to the extent it becomes overly commercial could also be detrimental to its authenticity although as Getz (2008) argues, this does not always follow true. As Highland Games are organised entirely by volunteers and are non-profit making events, perhaps they can remain sustainable with support from public bodies without the need for professionals, who require remuneration which can be expensive (Shone and Parry, 2004).

Highland Games have the ability to enhance the local image and create prosperity through attracting visitors to the region, particularly beneficial to rural areas. They have intrinsic visitor appeal and can bring civic pride to an area. This opens a series of research questions which are not addressed here but remain key questions for sociologists.

Jarvie (1991) argues that there are problems with the current Highland Games in Scotland which can be attributed to:

*'...advertising, sponsorship and the expansion of a comprehensive consumer culture which exploits many of the kitsch symbols of cultural identity; the relative acceptance of uniform rules, regulations and records under the control of such bureaucracies as the Scottish Games Association; ... the level of organisational control have led to a degree of democratisation; and the continuing influence and dependency upon a romantic cultural identity, including images of Balmorality. All these facets contribute to a dominant interpretation of the modern Highland Games which itself has been mediated by a number of broader problems of modernity'.*

In direct contrast to this sociological interpretation, some events may not have the ability to attract large numbers of visitors due to the manner in which they are promoted, but they are a key leisure event for the local community, an under-researched area within leisure studies (Crouch, 2000).

An alternative perspective is provided by Tranter (1998, p 55) who referred to the Games being valued '...as much for the enjoyment they provide for residents as for their power in attracting visitors'. Many are set in extraordinarily scenic locations against backdrops of mountains, lochs and glens which can be used as a promotional tool to encourage visitors and professional athletes, many of whom follow a competition circuit with the sole purpose of financial gain, identified by Macdonell (1937) as a way of removing the Games from their amateur status towards commercialisation. It is well recorded through minutes of meetings that throughout the years many Games have struggled to maintain enough profit to sustain their operation (Tranter, 1998; Airth Highland Games Committee, 1984) and at times members of local communities donated funds to ensure the continuance of Games (Colquhoun and Machell, 1927), highlighting the importance of developing different models to maintain their viability as events. Such occurrences indicate the crucial role of the organisers and their ability to sustain events through time, both financially and through community support and participation.

### **Issues for Highland Games Community Organisations**

Event management has increasingly become the domain of professionals as it is widely recognised that events can be implemented as an important strategic planning tourism tool, an area where amateurs are not considered the people with the most appropriate skills to organise and manage an event (Getz, 2008; Dimmock and Tiyce, 2001). This is often at odds with the underlying philosophy and rationale of community-based events as the volunteer-base often causes tensions with the wish to preserve a community-based heritage event rather than turning the historical activity into a tourist spectacle in pursuit of commercial funding. In Dimmock and Tiyce's (2001) analysis of festival organisations, there are a series of five stages of formalisation of an event: origin, informal organisation, emergence of

leadership, formal organisation and professionalism; there is acknowledgement by the authors that many community and volunteer organisations do not reach the final two stages. Shone and Parry (2004) argue that volunteers do not necessarily have less experience and, as Watt (1998) recognises, some volunteer and community groups are often very effective at organising and running events due to their high level of commitment and hard work along with their efforts to secure sponsorship or funding. This will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

In a report commissioned by the Scottish Executive on minority indigenous sports in Scotland DTZ (2007) suggests that community organisers may lack necessary information to enable them to successfully organise and manage an event to its full potential. The example given was a lack of knowledge in identifying ways of insuring against cancellation of an outdoor event if inclement weather conditions occurred, and it is recommended that more professional assistance and support from public bodies such as VisitScotland could prove beneficial. The report also suggests that a lack of business knowledge, committed volunteers, missed opportunities and lack of financial support are a threat to the sustainability of Highland Games. Interestingly, the DTZ (2007) report was “...commissioned to assess the current contributions, impact and future potential of Scottish indigenous sports that currently have no established regime or existing public sector funding, and have relatively low participation”. The Highland Games was considered alongside back-hold wrestling and William Baxter, currently President of The International Federation of Celtic Wrestling, in a Report to UNESCO on traditional sports stated that the Scottish Executive:

*“...remitted was very narrow and refused to consider other comparable activities such as competitive bagpipe playing and dancing. The reason for this (not by the Government) was made deliberately narrow in order to diminish the impact such activities would have on any perhaps positive report on traditional sport, as in Scotland they cannot be separated. At one of our largest Highland Games 900 dancers and about 1,500 pipers compete in addition to the wrestlers, runners and strongmen”.*

(International Round Table on the Promotion and Development of Traditional Sports and Games, 2006: 2).

This illustrates the tension between public sector evaluations of the Highland Games and a degree of misunderstanding of their diversity and community-base although the Scottish Executive (DTZ 2007) report did identify a lack of public funding, support and recognition of traditional sports. In fact UNESCO considers traditional Games and sports can ... *'form the backbone of a community'*...and would like to see traditional sports protected and promoted as they are considered to enhance community spirit, bring people together and install a sense of pride in a society's cultural roots' (UNESCO, 2007; Dimmock and Tiyce, 2001) which reiterates the community roots and focus of community events and key roles they can play in mobilising community pride.

Yet whatever perspective one adopts, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support or accept the linkage between these events and their ability to generate tourism and the different forms of leisure visits they generate. To date, no systematic research has been undertaken on the Games as leisure and tourism attractions and their role in Scottish tourism, and for this reason what follows is a presentation of the results of a Scotland-wide survey of Highland Games organisations.

### ***The Scale and Extent of the Highland Games in Scotland***

#### *Defining the Highland Games*

An important starting point for any research on the Scottish Highland Games is to establish a clear definition of the contemporary Highland Games so that the survey population is precisely delineated. According to Collins English Dictionary Highland Games are defined as 'a meeting in which competitions in sport, piping and dancing are held: originally in the Highlands of Scotland' (Collins, 2000). In accordance with this definition Highland Games in this context will specifically take account of events which include Highland

dancing, piping and pipe bands and heavyweight elements. Other events take place such as light field or track athletics in the form of sprint or hill races but not at all Games whilst others hold dancing and piping displays and demonstrations as opposed to actual competitions. Other events take place such as light field or track athletics in the form of sprint or hill races, cycling, wrestling and some hold dancing and piping displays and demonstrations as opposed to actual competitions, so for the sake of this research all current Scottish Highland Games will be considered.

The starting point for establishing the scale of the Games was to initially contact the Scottish Highland Games Association (SGA) as well as to conduct a web search. The SGA website is the most comprehensive however at the time of the search it did not contain a complete list of contact details for Highland Games' organisers. The data base was collated using a web search, the SGA website and 2006 Handbook to create a profile of event organisations in 2007. There was difficulty in identifying all the current games, which was also evidenced by Lothian (2001) who found in 2000, the Scottish Tourist Board identified 161 Highland Games (44 were discounted as not being 'proper highland Games) and the SGA Handbook included only 64 events which were affiliated members.

#### *Identifying the Scale of the Highland Games in Scotland in 2007*

On the basis of this search, 95 events were scheduled to be held in Scotland in 2007 quite a difference from the 117 identified by Lothian (2001) in 2000 and contrasting with the views of Chhabra, Healy et al., (2003a) who state that 'Highland Games were thriving in Scotland'. Yet as these recent statistics on the number of Games staged imply, there has been a decline in the number of Highland Games events since 2000. These events are geographically spread across all regions except Dumfries and Galloway, and the Orkney and Shetland Islands where no Highland Games events were identified. Since this information has been compiled it has come to light that a new Highland Games event took place at Falkirk during August 2007 which has not been included in this initial research.

### *The Geographical Distribution of Highland Games in 2007*

To assess the scale and scope of the Games, the different groups were classified into a regional distribution arbitrarily based on the VisitScotland regions as this would allow further analysis of the data in relation to tourist visitation.

As Figure 1 shows, Scotland was divided into 12 regions: the Highlands, the Borders, Argyll, Ayrshire, Perth, Grampian, Moray, Angus, Fife, the Central Belt, Orkney and Shetland Islands and Dumfries and Galloway. This clearly indicates that the majority of Games are held between the Highland region to the north and Argyll to the west, which hold more than half the events between them. On the basis of determining this Games population, a specific survey was developed to capture the nature of these organisations.

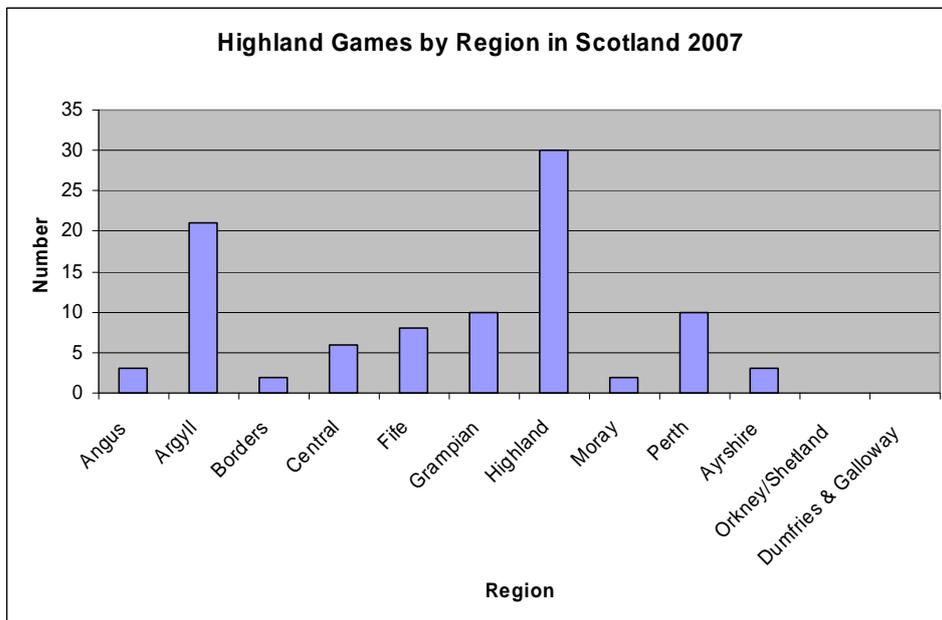


Figure 1: The Geographical distribution of the Highland Games events in Scotland in 2007

### **Methodology**

To seek to understand the scale, scope, organisation, management and operation of Highland Games events in Scotland, a postal survey was sent to all the Games organisations. This included a range of closed and open

questions and was two pages in length and accompanied by a reply paid envelope to assist with responses. The survey was designed to capture data about the structure of the organising committee, the participants along with a general indication of the size and scope of today's events. The questionnaire was piloted with four Games organisers although as acknowledged by Nicholson and Pearce (2001) it is difficult to conduct pilot studies with event organisers prior to the event, and limited time during the event adds further limitations. Slight modifications were made and questionnaires were sent out in January 2007. The findings are mostly based on 2006 figures with the exception of the number of admissions, revenue taken through admissions and competitors' fees, which sought to consider a five year time-series of data.

After a two week time period, reminders were sent to those who had not responded which resulted in increased responses achieving a 53% return rate which, according to Veal (1997), exceeds a satisfactory response rate of between 25% and 30% and although comparatively rare Finn, Elliot-White and Walton (2000) suggest that postal returns can reach up to 70% if the original survey is followed up twice. In this case the response rate was deemed satisfactory to provide a representative sample.

A further hindrance to collecting rich data was due to the Committee organisations being led by volunteers with all the problems that this can bring (see Wearing, 2004). Many Games do not keep in-depth records on a yearly basis in relation to attendance figures and revenue taken for spectators and competitors. Therefore, given the fact that the survey was predominantly targeting volunteers, a response rate of 53% is a laudable outcome for the study and can yield some meaningful results that will be relatively representative of the wider Games experience in Scotland. Indeed, as Figure 2 shows, the returned surveys from Ayrshire had a 100% response rate whereas in the Perth area 60% did not respond which was the highest non-response rate by area. In contrast, the response was high from Central Scotland with 83% returned whereas Argyll and the Highlands made up the

bulk of returns although the response rate was 52% and 50% respectively with the Borders, Fife, Grampian and Moray also contributing 50% return rate.

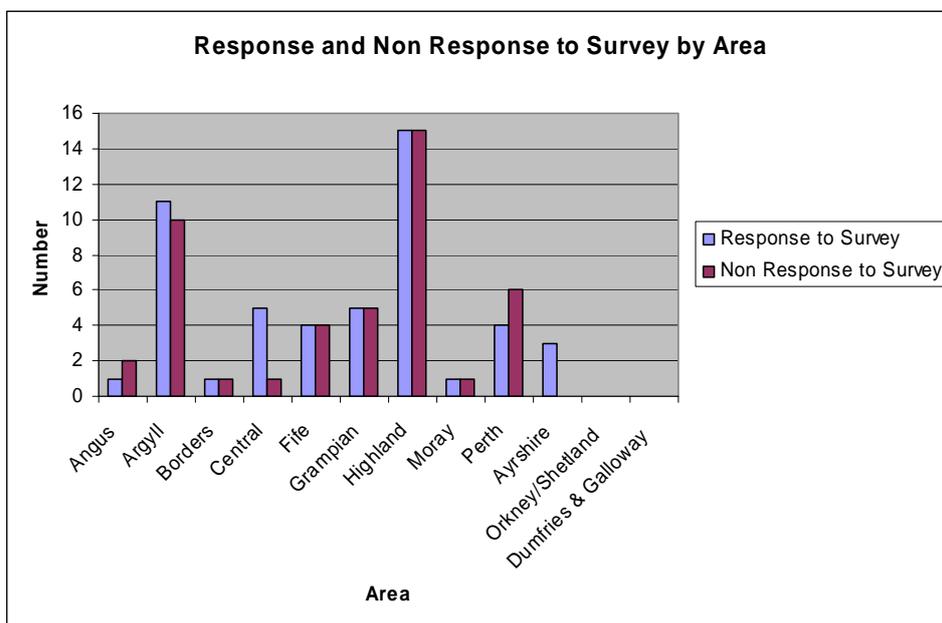


Figure 2: Response rate to questionnaire survey by Area

### Findings

Games are held during the summer months between the end of May and the middle of September, and as demonstrated in figure 3, there is an obvious uneven split between the months which dominate, resulting in some Games scheduled to take place on the same day. The biggest clash of events takes place on a Saturday during Augusts when six events, spread across four regions, are held on the same day (Games beginning in 1886, 1947, 1970, 1972 and 1996) followed by a Saturday in July (Games beginning in 1807, 1822, 1845, 1858 and 1989) when five different events take place on the same day, also spread across four regions. Much of the scheduling is historical, set long before official bodies such as the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association (RSPBA) established in 1930, or the SGA established in 1946, which set dates for new Games to avoid conflict with others. But as demonstrated below on the day when most events take place only one event originated prior to 1947 which could call into question the influence of the

SGA in some aspects as a governing body. Although not included here, the inclusion of the revival of Highland Games at Falkirk would further increase the number of events taking place in August.

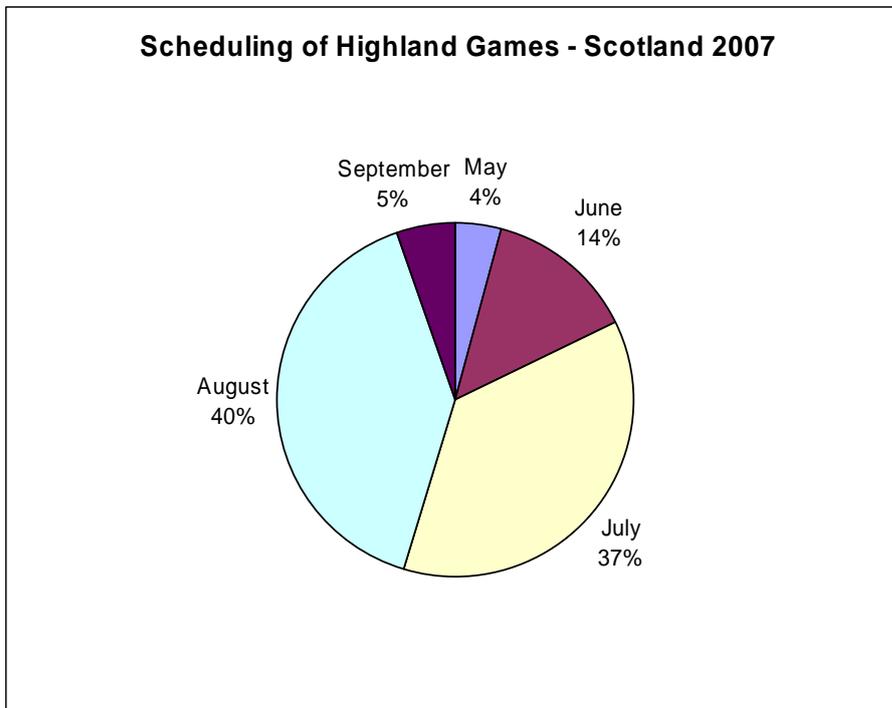


Figure 3: Scheduling of the Highland Games

All respondents indicated that the current Games had been formed after 1807 with 17 established as an annual event before 1900 and the other 33 established prior to 1996 which was the year the most recent event was established; the exception to this are two Highland Games who do not know their date of origin. As Figure 4 shows, the majority of the Games and Gatherings were formed in the years between 1961 and 1980 when a total of 13 were established and there were none at all established in the period between 1901 and 1920. There is a clear indication that the Highland Games as an event have become increasingly popular in recent years with 22 having been established since 1961; the 'unknown' responses suggest that the establishment of the Games have not been fully documented. Lothian (2001) documented the emergence of a number of Games from around the mid-1980's which were started specifically for commercial gain and targeted

towards tourist, although most of these games proved not to be viable as a commercial activity resulting in their disappearance.



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Figure 4: Origin of Scottish Highland Games since 1800

### *The Organisation and Structure of the Games in Scotland*

Based on returned questionnaires the Games are predominantly organised by a voluntary body of people except in two instances where local councils are the organisers (see Table 1), and as volunteers have the ability to successfully organise events according to Getz (1997) and Watt (1998). Table 1 also shows that 32 committees are organised by a standard democratic format with 13 registered as Limited Companies, two organised by Games Associations and one by a Round Table. Although all Games are organised by a committee, except for the two City Councils, the term committee in this setting also signifies that it has been convened specifically to organise Highland Games.

**Table 1: How the committee is organised**

	Frequency	Percent

Limited Company	13	26.0
Committee	32	64.0
Games Association	2	4.0
Round Table	1	2.0
City Council	2	4.0
Total	50	100.0

The composition of the organising committees varied between four and 50 people with 36% falling in the largest group of 10 – 14 members. With the exception of wholly Council run events and two instances where the treasurer and secretary received a small honorarium, all the organisers were volunteers. At an operational level, there was a considerable gap between the number of volunteers who assisted with organisation of Games and the running of the event on the actual day ranging between 20 and 150. As identified by Stebbins and Graham (2004) and Torkildsen (2005) these volunteers are vital to the success of the event particularly within community events. Although it did not always follow that the number of volunteers attending on the day increased proportionally with the number of admissions except in the two largest events who, as would be expected, had proportionally the highest number of volunteers on the day.

#### **Number of volunteers on the day**

No. of volunteers	Frequency	Percent
10 - 19	4	8.0
20 - 29	11	22.0
30 - 39	8	16.0
40 - 49	8	16.0
50 - 59	4	8.0
60 - 69	1	2.0
70 - 79	3	6.0
80 - 89	1	2.0
100 - 149	6	12.0
Over 150	2	4.0
Total	48	96.0
Missing cases	2	4.0

Total	50	100.0
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Table 2: Number of Volunteers assisting with the event

*Admissions*

There is a vast difference in attendance figures at Games across Scotland, most of which are estimated as confirmed by DTZ (2007). A number of Games indicated this information was confidential and withheld admission figures, others did not keep a record and were unable to provide even estimated figures and some had free admission and no recording mechanism in place to accurately record numbers which amounted to 13 events. To provide a gauge of visitors to the Games in 2006, Table 2 identifies the approximate number of visitors which demonstrates that 26% of the Games have attendance figures of between 3,000 and 5,999 closely followed by the 1,500 to 2,999 category with 20% and 16% having less than 1,500 visitors. A minority of the Games have attendance figures of over 6,000 with 15,600 admissions identified at the highest level which is somewhat short of the 25,000 visitors recorded by the DTZ (2007) study which was based on an interview with SGA and where no primary data was collected. This may indicate that the sample size here, whilst small, has covered a wider range of community-based events some of which are located in very small rural areas and retain the traditions of Highland events in remoter areas.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3: Total number of admissions 2006**

	Frequency	Percent
<1,500	8	16.0
1,500 - 2,999	10	20.0
3,000 - 5,999	13	26.0
6,000 - 8,999	2	4.0
9,000 - 11,999	2	4.0
12,000 and more	2	4.0
Unknown	13	26.0

<sup>5</sup> The current Royal Society of Edinburgh Inquiry into Remoter Rural Areas and Small Islands may shed light on this aspect of rural life and traditions when it concludes its report based on evidence currently being presented.

Total	50	100.0
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At Games where admission fees were charged the amount generated ranged between £358 and £82,000 although for reasons of confidentiality some organisations declined to divulge total admission fees, others could not distinguish admission fees from other monies such as competitors' entrance fees and programme sales. Admission fees in 2006 varied between free entrance and £10 for an adult with varying prices for concessions, children and family tickets (where available). Table 3 demonstrates the total revenue collected between 2002 and 2006 for admission or gate fees and competitors' fees indicating that the data collected declines in receding years reflecting the poor records and evidence retained by Games organisers. Nevertheless, Table 3 does provide a number of insights into the performance of the events and a degree of relative consistency in the revenue generated by the number of venues.

Year	No of Admissions	No completed	Admission Revenue £	No completed	No. of Competitor Admissions	No completed	Competitor Revenue £
2006	140,429	38	460,759	40	19,276	39	22,589
2005	99,717	26	359,548	29	13,363	26	14,785
2004	76,399	20	226,157	25	7,433	22	6,763
2003	81,912	19	214,858	25	7,462	22	7,341
2002	73,982	18	163,102	23	5,309	20	6,491

Table 4: Revenue Generated at Games Venues 2002-2006

Despite these weaknesses in disaggregated data for the period 2002-2006, Table 4 provides a greater series of insights into trends based on much higher response rates to a question on how much total revenue and admissions was received at the Games between 2002 and 2006. Although these figures are not directly comparable due to the varying numbers of questionnaires being completed it can provide some indication of trends over a five year period with consistency in the level of revenue and attendance.

Year	Total Revenue	Total Admissions
2006	483,348	159,705
2005	374,333	113,080
2004	232,920	160,231
2003	222,199	89,374
2002	169,593	79,291

Table 5<sup>6</sup>: Total Revenue and Admissions to Games 2002-2006

### *Budgets and Sponsorship*

As Bull et al., (2003) and Shone and Parry (2004) argue, the majority of not-for-profit organisations that organise the Games strive to at least break even with enough left over to top up the reserve fund to ensure the sustainability of the event. Due to the wide variance in size of the Games a diverse range of budgets existed for staging the events with 26% budgeting £5,000 or less, 6% operating on budgets over £100,000 and 28% working on budgets between £10,000 and £15,000. Budgets were not disclosed by 20% of Games organisers however, despite this, it indicated the variance in allocated budgets ranged from £1,000 at the lowest level to over £200,000. In common with most community-based events it appears that although sponsorship and financial support is considered vital to the continuance of these events, excluding council run events, only 14 Games were contributed to by local councils and other public agencies which is in accordance with Felsenstein and Fleischer (2003) who found that self sustaining events may be denied public funding. This is really surprising given the firm community footing of these events and local orientation at the smaller scale.

Sponsors are vital to the continuance of most of the Games with benefits received on both sides, the event continues to survive and the sponsors have access to a wide audience for advertising as noted by Getz (1997). The actual numbers of sponsors was fluid and likely to change from year to year with figures varying between one and 60 with a clear majority of 36% Games

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<sup>6</sup> As there was no provision made for competitors' entrance fees on the survey, a number of respondents did indicate that some Games did not charge competitors or they paid a normal admission fee which enabled them to compete

having one to nine sponsors and three receiving no kind of sponsorship at all. It is not always easy for the organisers to attract sponsors (Shone and Parry, 2004) however the largest events had the least number of sponsors which may indicate the sponsors using the event as part of a strategic marketing opportunity and maintaining exclusivity over the event as this can effectively bar all other sponsors which can increase the benefits to the sponsor (Bowdin *et al.*, 2007). Not surprisingly, not all the organisers were prepared to divulge the level of financial sponsorship received however, the amount disclosed varied between £300 and £57,150 with the majority at 20% receiving between £1,500 and £3,000. Sponsorship was also given in the form of provision of equipment such as seating and barriers, donation of prizes and perishable goods in the form of food, or sponsorship in kind (Shone and Parry 2004).

#### *The Financial Sustainability of the Scottish Highland Games*

Except the two areas which were organised by councils the other Games were ran by volunteers on a not for profit basis, with most either breaking even or making a small profit. Whilst in some years there were losses incurred, when there was a profit, 46% of respondents noted that this was put in a reserve fund, for occasions where adverse weather may cause the event to be cancelled or to close early resulting in loss of revenue, or re-invested to stage the event the following year. This highlights how delicate the finances are for Games as events, which vary year by year. One of the main failures of volunteer events according to Shone and Parry (2004) is a lack of ability to generate extra revenue which is vital to the sustainability of future events however, after topping up the reserve fund when there was a surplus, local charities and community projects benefited. Two Games indicated they were operating at a loss, and one organising committee had to raise extra funding to support the event through different money raising activities a common activity recognised by Shone and Parry (2004) within volunteer organisations. One of the council organised events indicated that any profit was directed to the council's event budget.

### *Visitor Profile*

Understanding the visitor mix at an event is important to consider how the event is configured in terms of appeal, role in the local community and its wider significance to the area and wider tourism economy. The vast majority of Games (94%) indicated that they had visitors from all areas of the UK as well as overseas although these figures were estimated as no differentiation was recorded at the entrance. When referring to length of stay the figures were quite evenly balanced between visiting the area for more than the duration of the event or only for the duration of the event which is a good indicator that the potential for overseas tourists to be staying in the area was quite high.

Whilst McKercher *et al.*, (2006) suggest that events do not bring people to an area, not only the majority of events indicated that their event was visited by local and regional visitors but almost all specified that international visitors attended the games at varying levels between 1% of the total admissions which were events on a small local level and up to 50% at larger events which may be considered as tourist attractions.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this survey was to scope the extent and scale of the Highland Games in Scotland from the perspective of the way they are organised and run. This was the first stage of a much larger research project to begin to understand the role of these events in local communities and their economies. What is evident from this survey is the greater variation in experience of hosting the Games in terms of their size and scope, which has hitherto not been evaluated by any organisation in this degree of depth. In the absence of any comprehensive up to date list of contacts for the different organisers of the Highland Games in Scotland, this study provides the best estimate available to date on the scale and extent of Games activity within Scotland, although it is apparent that this is also a fluid situation.

What is apparent from this survey, which was completed almost entirely by volunteers, is that few organising committees completed the survey fully so the information received is a starting point for further research on the way the Highland Games are currently structured and operated. The majority advised that they would be interested to be involved in future research and face to face interviews with key organisers will be one of the next stages of the research to begin to understand the degree of depth and complexity associated with staging these events at a local level. At this stage one Highland Games organiser indicated that they are in a position whereby they are losing money year on year which is causing the depletion of their reserve fund and who currently receive no support from any public bodies or local authorities. This extreme case highlights the financial challenge of maintaining these events at a community level when much of the current interest is running the annual event rather than long-term event development strategies at the local community level.

Other Games have indicated that they are close to sustaining a loss year on year and without outside support from public bodies such as EventScotland, VisitScotland, the Scottish Executive (sporting budget), local authorities or local enterprise companies it is possible that these Games sustaining a loss will become unsustainable and Scotland will lose more of these events. This was reiterated by DTZ (2007) from their interviews with the SGA and the fact that even minimal inputs from VisitScotland and other agencies could make a big difference. Indeed, this survey has achieved a far greater impact in terms of understanding the Games in Scotland since whilst DTZ (2007: 16) argued that 'robust figures for running costs and gate receipts are not available across the full complement of Highland Games events', this study has shown that some data does exist and can be accessed. In the case of the Highlands of Scotland it is clear the overall cost of running the Games can vary, as DTZ (2007) noted from £3,000 per annum for a small village scale Games up to £44,000 for a major event with profit/loss balances dependent upon gate receipts, weather conditions and overall advertising and promotion of the event. Research by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in 2004 noted that in

the Highlands, the Games yielded a net impact of £6.7 million as an estimate which could be used to estimate a Scotland-wide effect for the Games of a direct economic impact of between £10.2 million and £15.6 million and gross expenditure in the region of £16.2 million to £24.7 million. This helps to begin to justify why public sector interventions from Scotland's economic development agencies (the enterprise companies) may need to begin to recognise the value of a more coordinated response to the Games.

## **Conclusions**

The research has highlighted that the Games are a powerful community-based event in terms of the volume of attendees (visitors and competitors) and acts as a focus for social cohesion around a historical event. It is a largely unresearched issue despite the wider social and cultural role of Games in the leisure and tourism setting, particularly the contribution they make to the imagery and promotion of Scottish tradition and heritage in the peak tourist season. The continuing existence of Highland Games as a sporting, cultural and community-based event demonstrates the importance of historical links and traditions in forming authentic tourism products and unique visitor experiences, in addition to the vital support and continuation of meaningful community events.

In relation to specific management issues relating to the future sustainability of Highland Games, several challenges have emerged from this study. First, the reliance upon volunteers without any central point for training and management development highlights a fundamental weakness in the way community events have been viewed by public policymakers who only belatedly commissioned the DTZ (2007) study from a sporting perspective. Yet the fact that these events are developed, run and staffed by volunteers is a major undertaking and sign of community support for the wider public good as well as the civic pride which the events generate. Second, very simple management issues such as better recording of visitor information and entry fees would allow both individual Games venues and the Games organisation (SGA) to provide strategic advice and guidance on developing these

historically derived events which celebrate Scottishness and its distinctive culture.

Third, there is certainly a strong argument for organisations such as SportScotland to give these events a formal status to allow new funding streams to be available to support the community, although the low participation rates at these events, as DTZ (2007) argue, is unlikely to open up new sport funding. Even so, the contribution to tourism and leisure spending as an annual event is likely to be a powerful tool in community-led event development and further research is planned to develop this theme. Fourth, stronger focus on advertising and marketing and assistance from a central organisation such as VisitScotland along with training and advice would certainly begin to help professionalise the Games organisation, management and development. Fifth, an area that requires substantial development is sponsorship and community development of the event, if Games are to develop beyond a break-even steady state as acknowledged in the responses in this study and noted in DTZ (2007) analysis of the impact and balance sheets of these events.

Overall, the Games have evolved historically as a major community event and have a key cultural meaning to different groups as well as holding a potential role in harnessing greater tourism spending through more professional management and development. This remains a key area for development within the tourism sector if the Games are to play their rightful place in Scotland's tourism industry, helping it to reach its 50% growth agenda by 2015 by adding more value to the tourist experience (Scottish Executive 2006). They remain a largely neglected and overlooked element in Scotland's portfolio of tourism products, largely because they occur in the peak tourist season. Nevertheless, with concerns over encouraging a greater geographical spread of visitors and visitor spending across Scotland and the recognition that these events occur in many areas where domestic visitors cluster, there is a much greater role for local promotion.

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## **Programmes**

Cupar Highland Games Programme 2006

Dornoch Highland Gathering Programme 2006

Inverkeithing Highland Games Programme 2006

Lewis Highland Games Programme 2006

Taynuilt Highland Games Programme 2006