

John Muir Festival to open with launch of The Kelpies

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NOTE: Pictures on request

The John Muir Festival 2014 is to open with a spectacular night-time arts event on the theme of Scotland as Home which also marks the international launch of the nation's new cultural landmark, The Kelpies.

The celebration marks the start of a series of exciting John Muir Festival events over nine days and is a signature event in the Year of Homecoming programme. This begins with the two evenings, 17 and 18 April, of one-off, specially-commissioned night-time artworks illuminating Helix Park in Falkirk, as thousands gather round the iconic Kelpies for an extraordinary animation of the sculptures to a pulsating soundtrack.

Artist Andy Scott's colossal 300-tonne, 30-metre high horses heads' sculptures will be brought to life' with a breath-taking light, sound and flame performance by Groupe F, the internationally renowned pyrotechnic company which famously lit up the Eiffel Tower at the Millennium.

After this stunning opening event, First Minister Alex Salmond will officially open the new national pathway, the John Muir Way, in Dunbar on 21 April. There will be daily events at ten hotspots along the 134-mile route, before the Festival reaches Helensburgh on the same Clyde coast 11-year-old Muir and his family sailed en route to a new life in America. Appropriately for the founding father of the US National Parks a street ceilidh and firework Festival finale is planned at Scotland's national park at Loch Lomond in the evening of 26 April.

Tourism Minister, Fergus Ewing said: As 2014 is the centennial year of his death, the John Muir Festival and the opening of the John Muir Way in April this year provides an extremely fitting tribute. The festival also provides the platform for the international launch of the magnificent public art project, The Kelpies in Falkirk, an outstanding monument to Central Scotland's horse powered heritage.

The festival is a signature event within the Homecoming 2014 programme and will celebrate the life, legacy and unique contribution that Scottish born John Muir made to the conservation movement across the world and also showcases Scotland's outstanding natural beauty.'

Mike Cantlay, Chairman of VisitScotland, said: The John Muir Festival, which will launch with the official opening of this fantastic new landmark, will form a key part of our Homecoming Scotland celebrations, honouring an iconic, brilliant man from Scotland's past as well as celebrating our country's breath-taking landscapes. The Helix is set to be a major attraction in Scotland, bringing thousands of people - and real economic benefit - to the local community. The impressive Kelpies also offer a fitting tribute to Scotland's strong industrial past, as well as celebrating the myth and folklore that has encapsulated the imagination of visitors to Scotland for centuries.'

Ian Scott, Chairman of Falkirk Community Trust said: 'The Home event, produced by UZ arts, will announce both the arrival of The Kelpies to the international stage and the inaugural John Muir Festival in suitably dramatic fashion. It is a pleasure to welcome Groupe F to Scotland to create an installation that will animate Andy Scott's remarkable sculptures. They will work alongside Scottish artists to create, through a series of commissioned artworks, a unique experience on the theme of Scotland - our Home.'

The Kelpies form a dramatic centrepiece to the £43 million Helix development, which is expected

to attract an additional 350,000 visitors per year and add £1.5 million in annual tourism spend to the Falkirk area. They pay homage to the tradition of the working horses of Scotland. They stand where horses used to pull barges along Scotland's canals and worked in the fields.

The Kelpies stand on either side of a new one-kilometre canal extension, which will open up the inland waterways to international marine traffic and tourism. The development is the result of a unique collaboration between the Helix partners Falkirk Council, Scottish Canals and the Big Lottery Fund - and Glasgow-based artist, Andy Scott, which has been seven years in the making. The John Muir Festival 2014 celebrates the life and legacy of pioneering conservationist John Muir, and marks the opening of a new national pathway, the John Muir Way, named in his honour.

A host of events are planned daily along the route: ramblers, runners and cyclists will be invited to carry Muir-themed flags along sections, while a gang of bearded John Muir lookalikes will provide fun photo opportunities as well as thought-provoking quotes from Muir's writings. A camera obscura will offer a new perspective on the surrounding landscape. There will be seed bombing with Scottish wild flowers. A stylised tree will be raised at the launch and the finale in tribute to Muir's enduring love of giant sequoias. And in a quieter, more reflective tribute, an American and a Scots poet will walk the length of the John Muir Way at their own unhurried pace, planting native seeds and writing poetry along the way.

Tickets for the Falkirk and Loch Lomond events, as well as the full Festival programme including details of over 70 associated Festival events, are available online at: www.johnmuirfestival.com. The John Muir Way will allow walkers, cyclists and horse riders to easily visit some of the most beautiful coastal scenery, sweeping landscapes, wildlife sites and historic visitor attractions across Scotland's heartland. The rocky coasts of East Lothian where Muir played as a child, the dramatic Blackness Castle on the Forth, historic Linlithgow Palace and Roman hill forts on Antonine's Wall, and the unique Falkirk Wheel boat lift are just a few of the highlights. The route will be way marked with John Muir Way signs, and a website, book, leaflets and map will give people all the information they need to complete all or part of the trail.

John Muir was born in Dunbar in 1838, before emigrating to the United States in 1849. He helped save the Yosemite Valley in California, was a co-founder of The Sierra Club one of the most influential grassroots environmental organisations in the USA and successfully campaigned for national parks in America.

The John Muir Festival is funded by Scottish Natural Heritage, Homecoming Scotland and Creative Scotland. Home is also supported by Big Lottery Fund, Falkirk Council, Scottish Canals and Falkirk Community Trust.

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MEDIA QUERIES

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NOTES TO EDITOR

The Helix - The Helix project is transforming 350 hectares of land between Falkirk and Grangemouth into a vibrant new parkland with visitor attraction. The Helix is also boosting the area's path connections with the creation of over 27 kilometres of pathways. These will link into 400km of wider central Scotland path networks including Sustrans routes, the new John Muir Trail and the Bespoke Mountain Bike Trails, which are the first of their kind in Falkirk.

Another key Helix development is the installation of an enhanced canal hub with a visitor's centre as part of a new canal link into the Forth & Clyde Canal. The one-kilometre extension will return the canal back to its birthplace in Grangemouth some 250 years after it was built, and is the final piece in the Millennium Link project.

The Helix is being driven by a partnership of Falkirk Council and Scottish Canals. The project has been awarded £25 million by the Big Lottery Fund's Living Landmarks programme: www.thehelix.co.uk

Homecoming Scotland 2014 is a Scottish Government initiative managed by EventScotland, which is a part of VisitScotland. Homecoming Scotland 2014 will enable the tourism and events industries to further demonstrate the important role they play in delivering sustainable and sustained growth to Scotland's economy. Further information: www.homecomingscotland.com

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UZ Arts is a registered Scottish Charity supporting artists and producers in creating large scale, innovative work outside conventional venues, across art forms and across borders.

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