

A right to a living

EARLIER THIS YEAR, SCF carried out a survey into the effects of wildlife on crofting, in response to a growing body of anecdotal evidence from our members about damage caused by, especially, deer, geese and sea eagles.

There is a balance to be struck here. Crofters are not against wildlife. Indeed the environmentally sensitive agricultural systems operated by crofters have meant wildlife has survived in the Highlands and Islands whereas it has disappeared in more intensively farmed areas. But deer have to be managed, geese controlled, species not introduced without due consideration.

A flourishing natural environment can bring tourism and income to crofting areas as well

as lifting our sometimes-jaded spirits. And it is possible to produce good quality food in co-existence with wildlife.

But crofters also have a right to make a living and the loss of stock and grazing can significantly affect this – as our survey shows. If crofting isn't economically viable then it will cease; and the drift away from the glens and islands will accelerate.

In addition, the stock we keep have rights too – the code of recommendations for the welfare of livestock talks about the five freedoms, which include freedom from pain and injury and freedom from fear and distress. Crofters do adjust their practices to mitigate the effects – lambing on in-bye rather than on the hill, caging poultry – but there are limits to what can be achieved by proactive management.

The on-line survey had over 250 replies and the results confirmed the scale of the problem.

30% of respondents reported significant effects of deer on their land – through eating grass, fodder put out for sheep and cattle, eating trees and causing damage. Fencing can work but is a big expense. A number of respondents replied resignedly “not yet”.

Predation by reintroduced sea eagles significantly affects 16% of respondents. Loss of lambs is the main problem but there are also reports of hogs and ewes being hunted and killed and poultry being taken. One respondent reported attacks on a weekly basis in the summer. Others have cut back on use of hill ground because of losses.

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SCF chair meets with cabinet secretary

YVONNE WHITE, chair of the SCF, recently met cabinet secretary for rural economy Fergus Ewing to discuss crofting issues and ask what the Scottish Government (SG) will do to ensure the future of crofting. Points raised included:

LFASS and the recent announcement that next year would see a cut to 80% of the current rate with a further cut to 40% the following year. Yvonne made it clear that LFASS payments are vital for crofters, who face natural constraints such as poor-quality land and topographical challenges. The prospect of this support being drastically cut is unthinkable. It would put many crofters and sheep stock clubs out of business.

Mr Ewing said that SG is committed to keeping LFASS at 100%. Officials are looking for a workaround. An option under consideration is top-slicing the Basic Payment Scheme so top recipients are paid slightly less in order to redistribute to LFAs.

Geese Yvonne emphasised concern over the lack of financial support from SNH for goose management, and the damage caused by wild geese to grazing and crops in the Western Isles. Population control does not cost much yet funding is being withdrawn. Including goose management in an agri-environment scheme was considered, should direct funding not be possible. Redistribution of the existing



Yvonne White and cabinet secretary for rural economy, Fergus Ewing

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