

Crofting Commission collapses as a credible regulator



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FOUR YEARS AGO, at the assessors' conference, we met for the first time our new, largely elected, Crofting Commission.

It was an occasion of great optimism. We had people responsible for the governance of our precious crofting system who, it seemed, believed in it with a passion, would preserve and defend it – and had a vision for its strong and sustainable future. Four years on that vision has turned to nightmare. Crofting is mired in existential crisis. The catastrophe of Brexit threatens marginal agriculture in all the nations of the UK; and for crofters it comes on top of the collapse of our Commission as a credible regulator.

That crisis is nowhere more starkly manifest than in our common grazings. This huge land resource, which is within the control of crofting communities, is capable of transforming the futures of some of our most remote and challenged regions. The choice is clear. A common grazing can either be the fiefdom of an ever-dwindling number of graziers, or it can be a sustainable source of income helping to ensure the future of crofting and the retention of a demographically balanced, economically active population. Forestry, renewable energy, stock clubs, affordable housing; these are some of the developments that townships have pursued with huge success. And here's the thing; they

are entirely compatible with, and in many cases actually improve, traditional livestock grazing.

These things are only possible where townships have democratic control over their finances. Significantly, those townships whose grazings committees were summarily dismissed by the Commission were pursuing just such diversified projects. In the past they would have probably been case studies in a glossy annual report. The Commission took the view that the interests of absentees and of nihilistic minorities took precedence over the future of crofting and communities, and they did so with a

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The Crofting Commission convener crisis

IN HIS LATEST statements to the media, Colin Kennedy, the convener of the Crofting Commission, has said that he has no intention to stand down, despite widespread calls for his resignation.

He refutes any wrong doing and claims to have operated within the law, notwithstanding the fact that lawyers and the cabinet secretary for crofting, Fergus Ewing, who is himself from a legal background, have said he is wrong. Kennedy has accused the Scottish Government of legal wrongdoing and suggests that the cabinet secretary should resign. Kennedy has no legal background, but an astonishing amount of arrogance matched only by his shamelessness.

This is all very confusing for onlookers. Colin Kennedy was rebuked by the cabinet secretary

for the way in which he handled issues with common grazings committees. Mr Ewing disagreed with Kennedy's interpretation of the law and suggested that an apology from the Commission was due to crofters affected by the mistreatment. The apology would be expected to come from Colin Kennedy, as one of the duties of the convener is to speak for the Commission.

At the board meeting that this apology was due to be made, Kennedy walked out. The board reconvened and jointly issued a request to the convener to stand down. Kennedy has said on the BBC that he had no knowledge of the fact that his fellow commissioners have no confidence in him. He must be the only person in Scotland who hadn't heard that the commissioners unanimously agreed that he should stand down.

Despite this vote of no-confidence, Kennedy has remained in place and has launched a vicious counter-attack. As expected he appears to be trying to pass the blame for the whole fiasco to his fellow commissioners, to the CEO, who has left the Commission for a new job, to the cabinet secretary and to the staff of the Crofting Commission. Everyone is to blame but him. In outbursts to the media he accuses everyone in the Commission of misconduct, even though he has been responsible for how the Commission operates since the ousting of Susan Walker, the previous convener, back in May 2015. His latest move is to issue a formal complaint against the cabinet secretary, accusing Mr Ewing of being

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Message from the chair...

Fiona Mandeville



DEMOCRACY IS THE basis of our civilisation. But that freedom of choice and governance by elected representatives can present challenges.

The Brexit vote caused the biggest drop in the value of the pound in over 30 years, with resulting effects on savings, businesses, pensions and trade. We have no idea yet how much agricultural support will drop once the EU contribution ends. I cannot envisage any positive outcomes, but I'd love to be wrong. Lambs at recent sales have done well due to the lower pound, but that is a temporary bonus. We consider Brexit further on page 11.

Scotland is looking again at an independence referendum and how we can remain a part of Europe.

Closer to home we have a new round of Crofting Commission elections for commissioners. Four years ago we welcomed the election of commissioners as a breakthrough for crofting. A chance at last for crofters to elect knowledgeable,

experienced people from amongst themselves to sit on the board of the Commission and do a good job for crofters. With six elected commissioners and three appointed by government, the balance was in the people's favour.

But the result of this process has been the opposite of what was envisioned. As I sit at my kitchen table writing this early on a Sunday morning at the beginning of November, crofting is in disarray. The Crofting Commission is eviscerated and its convener a liability who refuses to stand down.

He is trying to save face by justifying himself through the pages of the press. In doing so he earns further disrespect. The questionable claims he is making so publicly should have been made internally, through appropriate channels, months ago. This is no way to conduct the affairs of a government body.

At a time when our energies should be concentrating on developing a way forward for crofting

in the face of Britain's exit from the EU, we are instead preoccupied with how to free crofters from this burden.

The lesson we must learn from this sorry tale is the vital importance of good numbers of people standing for election as commissioners; and equally, for us all to use our vote – wisely. It is so important that we encourage the right people to stand for election and that we all use our democratic right – and duty – to get a new board at the Commission next March that will start to redress the negativity and despair of recent months.

You can read more about the Commission election process elsewhere in this issue.

On page 4 we have a proposal from some crofters in Sleat on Skye for a new way to administer crofting, doing away with the Commission as we know it. We also reproduce the recommendations on crofting regulation from the Committee of Inquiry on Crofting on which the Sleat proposals are based. Please let us have your views.

Of course, SCF operates democratically too. Our policies are those of the majority of our members. We gather members' views in a number of ways – at meetings; by letter and survey; by email polling; through the pages of *The Crofter*, face to face. Email is the most cost-effective way for us to inform and consult our members, and if you haven't already given us an email address where we can contact you, please do it now. If you don't have one, it can be that of a family member or even a neighbour.

An important part of our operation is our network of local contacts – people on the ground in the crofting areas. If you would like to be part of this network and help us work at the grass-roots level, please get in touch. We are keen to expand our network as it is the root of our democracy. You get to help your neighbours and be part of a self-help community, but you benefit through your involvement and the links and information we provide. Having a stake in your community is rewarding.

Democracy is key in the operation of grazings committees too. We have seen how much can be achieved by well-run grazings committees and the potential and importance of this level of crofting participation cannot be over-emphasised. Several articles on following pages look at this in more detail.

Finally, my two-year term as SCF chair comes to an end in December. The time has flown by and we have had a great deal of work to get through. We gathered a lot of support for the principle of new crofts; it is slow to progress but it is moving. For example the Clan Donald Lands Trust in Sleat on Skye has created three new crofts – a welcome initiative which you can read more about on page 17.

It has been an honour to serve as chair of the Scottish Crofting Federation – a role I never expected, and indeed resisted. But in fulfilling it to the best of my ability I have seen the dedication of so many people to crofting and the good will of government staff and our MSPs. Crofting can have a positive future if we work together, at all levels of democracy, and I wish my successor well.

I'll end by wishing you all a happy, restful festive season and a fruitful crofting year to come.



Hector MacLeod

CROFTING LOST another of its stalwarts in August this year.

Hector MacLeod was a former Scottish Crofters Union Skye area chair and then an SCF director.

A crofter in Sconser on Skye, Hector was brought up at Knock farm in Sleat, the youngest of four. His father Murdo was from Raasay and his mother Dolina from Lower Breakish. He married Chrissie in 1980 and had two of a family, Murdo and Donna. Sadly Murdo died suddenly in 2007.

Hector was involved in many projects across the island, including Sconser grazings

committee, the Skye Agricultural Show, John Muir Trust management committee, Sconser community council and the Skye and Lochalsh abattoir.

He was always available to attend Scottish Crofters Union and SCF meetings and gave huge amounts of his time to help his fellow crofters. A practical joiner, he did a good job of reconfiguring the SCU office in Broadford. Hector will always be remembered when the SCU/SCF lectern is in use, as he made that too.

Our condolences go to his wife Chrissie, daughter Donna and grandchildren Ceitidh and Crisdean.

Codes of conduct



Colin Kennedy

COLIN KENNEDY, convener of the Crofting Commission, has stated that "hell will freeze over" before he resigns.

There was an implication, at First Minister's Question Time, that if he didn't jump he would be pushed. However, he has yet to be pushed.

Mr Kennedy has made a formal complaint against Fergus Ewing MSP, the cabinet secretary with responsibility for crofting, accusing him of 'being in breach of the ministerial code'. This is rather ironic given the numerous accusations over a number of months from various parties against Mr Kennedy for his purported breaches of the code of conduct for members of devolved public bodies.

The seven principles of conduct underpinning public life (as identified by the Nolan Committee in 1995) are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

The Scottish Executive took the Nolan

Committee recommendations one step further by introducing two further principles: public service and respect. Holders of public office have a duty to act in the interests of the public body of which they are board members and to act in accordance with the core tasks of the body. They must also respect fellow members of their public body and employees of the body and the role they play, treating them with courtesy at all times.

It is arguable that in particular these two principles have been flouted by behaviour on the part of the convener since he stormed out of the board meeting in Brora some weeks ago.

It is unclear what Mr Ewing could possibly have done to contravene any of the principles of public life which are embodied in the Scottish Ministerial Code. There has been a suggestion that Mr Kennedy's complaint against Mr Ewing is a vexatious one simply designed to prevent Mr Ewing being able to remove him from office whilst the complaint is being investigated.

However, it should be remembered that a complaint against Mr Kennedy by the former Upper Coll common grazings committee did not prevent him being instrumental in the decision-making process that resulted in that committee being removed from office following the complaint being made.

It is also the case that in law it is the Scottish Ministers (plural) who have the right to remove a commissioner from office. If need be Mr Ewing can declare an interest and allow his ministerial colleagues to make that necessary decision.

Brian Inkster, Inksters Solicitors

Interim chief executive appointed to the Crofting Commission



Bill Barron

THE CROFTING COMMISSION has a new interim chief executive.

Bill Barron joined the Commission on an interim basis on 24 October and will lead the organisation until a permanent appointment is made. Bill takes on the role following the departure of its previous chief executive, Catriona Maclean, to take up a promotion within Scottish Government.

Bill was formerly head of the Scottish Government's Housing Support and Homelessness Unit. He has worked within Scottish Government for over 18 years and has a wealth of experience in change management and delivery, policy development and finance.

Bill commented: "I am looking forward to working with everyone at the Crofting Commission and our partners, to ensure that the Commission remains focused on giving a good service to crofters, promoting and protecting the interests of crofting, and providing effective regulation."

SCF expressed its support for the rapid appointment of an interim CEO to the Crofting Commission.

"We were very concerned when Catriona MacLean left the Commission for another post in the Scottish Government," said Fiona Mandeville, chair of the SCF, "as, with all the recent turmoil still unresolved, a delay in re-appointment could leave the organisation in a very vulnerable state. I wrote to the cabinet secretary, Fergus Ewing, expressing this fear. It is heartening then to see swift action and an interim appointment."

Ms Mandeville continued, "We wish Bill Barron well in the job and all strength to his arm in tackling the changes that will be necessary to help the Crofting Commission back to its feet. Having now met him, we believe he is focussed on the issues that need urgent resolution and that his analytical background and impartiality will serve him well in the daunting task he faces."

"We look forward to a conclusion to this episode."

Crofting endeavours recognised at the Law Awards of Scotland



Brian Inkster

BRIAN INKSTER has been shortlisted for Solicitor of the Year at the Law Awards of Scotland.

This nomination recognises his endeavours in crofting law over the past year and in particular his quest to see justice done on the alleged abuse of

power within the Crofting Commission over the sacking of three common grazings committees.

Brian Inkster has been very vocal in the press, radio and on TV over the issue. He has written 97 blog posts on this topic alone over the past six months.

The Crofting Commission recently accepted their decisions as being wrong and issued an apology to the crofters affected. However, conflict continues within the Crofting Commission with a clear divide between their convener and the other commissioners.

Brian Inkster said "I am honoured to be one of only three solicitors in Scotland shortlisted for this award. Hopefully it will help to highlight further the plight of the ordinary crofter at the hands of a regulator that is out of control. There is still much more that the Scottish Government needs to do to restore confidence in the Crofting Commission and I will be making my views known on that in the coming months."

Inksters Solicitors, with offices in Portree, Inverness, Wick, Forfar, Glasgow and a visiting base in Lerwick, have also been shortlisted for Litigation Firm of the Year and their trainee solicitor, Alistair Sloan, for Trainee of the Year at this year's Law Awards of Scotland.

TIME FOR A NEW CROFTING ADMINISTRATION?

Crofting regulation recommendations by the Committee of Inquiry on Crofting

WHEN THE COMMITTEE of Inquiry on Crofting published its findings, it recommended a new structure for the regulation and development of crofting, based closer to the crofting community.

Regulation would be carried out at an area level (the crofting counties being divided into 7-10 regulatory areas) and crofting development would be led at township level. There was confusion over the scale of these functions, many crofters believing that it was recommended that regulation should be at township level. This was perhaps due to the confusing term 'local crofting board' being used, though local in this context meant, for example, a board for the whole of the Western Isles. This led to the recommendations being rejected.

It could be argued that the recent disarray seen in the resultant centralised Crofting Commission model that was adopted stemmed from too few commissioners having relatively too much responsibility and authority over circumstances remote from them. Is it time to look again at alternative models of crofting governance? For the purpose of discussion, we have reproduced what the Committee of Inquiry on Crofting recommended:

A separation in the functions of (1) crofting regulation and enforcement, (2) crofting development and (3) the maintenance of the Register of Crofts. Greater local accountability and ownership is also required in the implementation of the regulation and enforcement function.

The Crofting Commission's current responsibility for regulation would be discharged in future by a new body – the Federation of Crofting Boards. This would be a single organisation comprising 7-10 elected local crofting boards and a central executive supplying staffing support, finance and other central services to these boards. These staff would be dispersed in their locations.

Each local crofting board would comprise a majority of elected crofters along with representatives appointed by Scottish Ministers. The elected boards would translate national crofting regulations into rules applying to the local areas they cover, within the parameters of the national regulations.

The central body would be headed by a chief executive who would be the accounting officer and responsible for advising local crofting boards on the parameters of national regulations. Decisions of local crofting boards could be appealed to the Scottish Land Court. Consideration should be given to setting up, within the federation body, a non-statutory appeals mechanism for resolving disputes before being taken to the Scottish Land Court.

Each local crofting board would be responsible for regulating crofting within their area in the interests of sustainable crofting communities and the public benefits for Scotland of sustainable rural development in remote and fragile areas, embracing economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Training and support would be available to board members to build their capacity.

The Federation of Crofting Boards would have a statutory right of consultation on primary or secondary legislation on crofting proposed by the Scottish Government. It would also have the right to offer advice on other matters affecting crofting. All such advice (on proposals for legislative change or other matters affecting crofting) would be published. The Federation of Crofting Boards would develop its own internal arrangements for agreeing single unified advice, taking account of the views of the local crofting boards.

Scottish Government should continue to retain responsibility for implementing the crofting-specific grant schemes.

The aim of these arrangements is to provide greater local flexibility and accountability in the regulatory function – as permitted within the national regulations – so that local circumstances can be taken into account.

What do you think about a reformation of the Crofting Commission?

Please consider the recommendations above, read the Sleat proposal in full, and let us have your views.

Follow the link or go to the consultations page on the SCF's website – www.crofting.org – for the Sleat proposal.

Self-regulation of crofting to meet the modern need

Duncan MacDonald outlines a proposal for an alternative to the current crofting regulation system.

THE SLEAT GENERAL Grazings Committee (SGGC) in south Skye believes the current crofting system operates badly, to the point where it is a threat to its economic future. We are aware (along with many) that radical change is overdue.

The SGGC has serious reservations about the imbalance between productivity and regulation of the current system and proposes abolishing the Crofting Commission and instating a system that is based on support, self-determination and self-regulation, accompanied by a reduction in administration. This alternative method of governance proposes a radical change from what has gone before, concentrating on self-development to encourage productivity and bring about financial reward. It is aimed at bringing the whole crofting system into a condition that dovetails with the current business environment and renders it fit for purpose for the foreseeable future.

At present, many crofters are weary of advancing their position because the outlook is burdensome. Control of the crofting system is currently top down, with production and



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profitability being a variable which follows. As any community aspect of collective accountability is removed by an enforceable regulatory system, there is no direct local responsibility for the enhancement of a crofting township. There can be little vigour in a system where strict control is at arm's length and local incentive does not thrive.

If crofting is to be a dynamic industry, it needs to have the focus shifted from regulation and administration first, production and profitability (perhaps), to production and profitability first with admin and regulation in support.

This would be a radical turnaround for all

agencies concerned with crofting and would also require a completely fresh mindset and new concepts to be embodied within crofting law.

Lessons from past and current times need to guide us on what to avoid when preparing crofting for its future. Adherence to embedded practices will maintain crofting in the condition it is in today, with its attendant overburden of bureaucracy, dependency and much malaise.

To stick with the past is a vote for more of the same. Crofting needs to move forward if it is going to be a competitive force within the highland economy.

The proposal from SGGC is intended as an outline document, adding meat to the bones of relevant recommendations from the Committee of Inquiry on Crofting report and can be viewed on the SCF's web site at: <http://bit.ly/2fiVNaA>

The SGGC represents 80 shareholders and comprises the grazings clerks of seven actively crofting townships. The SGGC clerk is Duncan MacDonald, a qualified business advisor (now retired) who continues to carry out advisory work for the Prince's Trust. He is clerk or secretary to five committees or groups actively involved with crofting in Sleat.

TIME FOR A NEW CROFTING ADMINISTRATION?

Current crofting law serves lawyers – not crofters



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There can be no doubt that the crofting world is not a happy place at the moment, comments MSP Donald Cameron.

MUCH OF THIS IS down to the ongoing saga surrounding the Crofting Commission. I don't intend to go over that ground again, except to observe that this dispute also raises wider points of general importance for crofting.

First, there are serious questions about the operation and governance of the Crofting Commission. This isn't just about the rules – it's about confidence in the system. At a recent meeting of crofters in Lochaber organised by NFUS, I took a straw poll of those present as to whether they thought the Commission was fit for purpose.

The answer was a resounding 'no'.

Some of that feeling might just be the usual resistance towards government intervention, and there's no doubt we require an official body of some sort to organise crofting. Nevertheless, I would support a thorough review of the commission and its workings.

There are other fundamental problems with crofting regulation. As someone who practised

in the area for 11 years as an advocate, I can state my view quite simply: crofting law works for lawyers but not for crofters.

Too often, the law doesn't reflect what is happening on a day-to-day basis. The current dispute contains one striking example. How do grazing committees deal with large sums of money which are paid following a development on common grazing land?

The legal position is quite plain: any sums due are payable to common graziers as individuals because they are the ones who hold the grazing right. The grazing committee is simply the channel through which those funds are administered.

But, in practice, many grazing committees will hold sizeable funds and want to use them for the benefit of the local community. What happens when these two positions collide: where a common grazier seeks his or her share of the funds in the face of a grazing committee wanting to use the funds communally? And what's the timeframe for any disbursement of funds? They're thorny issues which are crying out to be resolved – and I am glad to hear there is now an attempt to draw up guidelines on the matter for grazing committees.

That aside, the law itself is becoming ever

more complicated after endless amendments of the 1993 Act: in one recent court case even the eminent Scottish Land Court referred to 'strange' and 'problematic' definitions in the legislation. If that's the expert court speaking – then heaven help the rest of us.

Crofting legislation was originally meant to give viable agricultural units security of tenure at fair rents. But too often that law doesn't reflect modern crofting which, against a backdrop of steady decline in livestock farming in the Highlands and Islands, is much more complex, diverse and business-orientated than the system for which the legislation was created.

In short, we need a comprehensive rewrite of the law – or indeed a new law. Crofting law has to be simpler, more accessible and more reflective of crofting today, which for me should be about encouraging economic revival in our remote rural areas, so we can retain our talented young people in the community, so we can attract investment and so we can encourage rural business – business which is often agricultural but can involve other forms of enterprise too.

Much important work has already been done on crofting law reform and by the crofting law sump. But there is deep frustration that the Scottish Government has not responded with more urgency to the sump's final report.

One glimmer of hope is the Scottish Parliament's Rural Economy Committee which will be taking evidence on crofting over the next six months to identify some of the key issues that are causing such disquiet.

Once it has identified the key problems, the committee will be looking at ways to encourage the Scottish Government to move crofting reform up their political agenda.

So it's not all doom and gloom. Once the current storm clouds have passed, I am convinced there is a bright future for the sector.

But let's ensure the law serves crofting, and not the other way round.

The Crofting Commission convener crisis

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in breach of the ministerial code. Is this for real? The head of a public body attacking a cabinet secretary in the press?

How much is this whole affair costing the public purse? The resources being used trying to contain Kennedy's rampage must be astronomical. We have the crisis of Brexit staring us in the face and the fundamental weaknesses in the whole regulatory framework, yet a phenomenal amount of everyone's time and energy, and public money, is being expended on this test of Kennedy's pride versus reason.

This dreadful humiliation of crofting regulation, of our government, and the complete waste of public money has got to stop. It is understandable that Mr Ewing has not jumped in earlier. Kennedy will clearly attempt to wreak as much damage to crofting as he can, whether in post or removed. Presumably the Scottish Government is attempting to limit that damage as much as possible.

But the gloves have to come off. Hopefully, by the time you read this, the first minister will have intervened and sacked Kennedy.

This article first appeared in The Oban Times.

TIME FOR A NEW CROFTING ADMINISTRATION?

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vehemence that we might have hoped would instead be used against the worst cases of speculation, misuse or landlord recalcitrance.

The damage has been done and there's no going back. Lawyers are involved so, with the greatest respect to my crofting lawyer friends, there will be no early resolution. Legislative change will undoubtedly be needed, but when will government be prepared to take this on, given the Brexit bürach and consequent constitutional upheaval? So grazings committees – volunteers with the wellbeing of crofting at heart – can only carry on doing what we do and make the best of it; and hope to avoid the malicious interference of those who wish us harm.

Finally, here is a wee case study of my

own. Twenty-odd years ago I was clerk of a large general grazing with nearly a hundred shareholders. We had a modest annual payment for a management agreement and this was banked until it was sufficient to pay for around ten kilometres of hill fencing. This was not anything dramatic or ground-breaking but it enabled the grazings to be managed effectively by a dwindling number of active shareholders and ensured its future for the next generation. Without it, three thousand hectares of hill would probably now lie abandoned. If we had not had that money in the bank, it just wouldn't have happened.

Maybe I should be awaiting a visit from The Constable.

Our thanks to SCF's Skye and Lochalsh branch vice-chair Donald Murdie for this article.



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Cross Party Group on Crofting



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SINCE ITS re-establishment at the beginning of this parliamentary session, the Cross Party Group on Crofting has enjoyed record attendance.

We are very privileged to have three co-convenors, Rhoda Grant MSP, Tavish Scott MSP and Kate Forbes MSP. SCF has been returned as secretariat.

The main topic has of course been the crisis the Crofting Commission is finding itself in over common grazings. Unfortunately the convener of the Commission did not attend most of the meetings, avoiding opportunities to explain his stance and answer questions from concerned policy-makers and stakeholders.

Other issues concerning crofting are always on the agenda: crofting law and administration; crofting development; crofting and the CAP; The Five Actions for Crofting. A feature topic is presented each meeting. Future agenda items will include:

- new crofts
- rural communications
- croft registration fees for community landlords
- management of predators and pests – geese in particular
- ferry services
- croft house loan
- Areas of Natural Constraint.

Members of CPGoC:

- Animate Consulting
- Assynt Foundation
- Assist Social Capital
- Crofting Commission
- Crofting Connections
- Care Farming Scotland
- Common Good Food
- Crofting Law Group
- Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
- Crofting Register Stakeholder Forum
- European Forum for Nature Conservation & Pastoralism
- Forestry Commission Scotland
- Highland Council
- Highlands & Islands Enterprise
- Highland Small

- Communities Housing Trust
- James Hutton Institute
- LANTRA
- National Farmers Union Scotland
- Nourish Scotland
- National Trust for Scotland
- ODRO
- Registers of Scotland
- Royal Society for the

- Protection of Birds Scotland
- SAC consulting
- Soil Association Scotland
- Scottish Crofting Federation
- SCF Young Crofters
- Scottish Churches Rural Group
- Scottish Government Crofting Stakeholder Forum

- Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate
- Scottish Land & Estates
- Scottish Natural Heritage
- Scottish Parliament Information Centre
- Scottish Rural Network
- Scottish Rural

- Parliament
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- University of Highlands and Islands
- Woodland Crofts Partnership
- Woodland Trust Scotland
- plus individuals with an interest in crofting

CROFTING COMMISSION ELECTIONS

Crofters urged to make their voices heard in the future of crofting and the regulation of crofters



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THE SCOTTISH Government is encouraging crofters to stand as candidates in the upcoming Crofting Commission elections.

The Commission is the regulator of the crofting system, with commissioners responsible for promoting the interests of crofting and advising Scottish ministers.

On 25 October draft regulations were put before the Scottish Parliament to ensure the Crofting Commission elections proceed smoothly in March 2017.

The amended regulations cover:

- the process of appointing a new commissioner, should a vacancy arise before 2022;

- who should be able to stand for election;
- absent and proxy votes;
- the maximum amount and process for election expenses.

The regulations make no changes to the six constituency boundaries.

The government is reminding the country's crofters to vote in the March poll. The election will be conducted by post and is being held to appoint commissioners for the six crofting constituencies: East Highlands, Orkney and Caithness, Shetland, South West Highlands, West Highlands and Western Isles.

Cabinet secretary for the rural economy and connectivity, Fergus Ewing, said: "Crofting makes a

vital contribution to the economy, environment and communities in Scotland's rural areas. Next year will see the second-ever elections to the Crofting Commission and it is crucial that our 14,000 crofters' interests are well represented.

"This is an important time as we seek to ensure a strong and vibrant future for crofters, which is why it's vital to have a Crofting Commission made up of people who represent and reflect the interests and diversity of Scotland's crofting community.

"To achieve that, we need people with a commitment to ensuring a longer-term future for crofting to stand for election. It's also so important that all crofters make their

voices heard by voting in March's election."

The deadline for nominating candidates is 27 January. Voting papers are to be delivered at the start of March and due to be returned by 16 March. The results will be announced shortly afterwards.

The participation of all crofters in these elections is very important. Please nominate someone (or yourself) who you believe would be a worthy leader of the Crofting Commission. There are plenty of experienced and able crofters in our communities who could do a good job as a member of the Crofting Commission board. Let's learn the lessons of the past four years and make sure we have the best people in place for this important role which is key to crofting's well-being. Remember nominations are due by 27 January.

It's equally important that we all have our say, so use your vote and use it wisely. Make sure you return it in good time for 16 March.

SCF chair Fiona Mandeville



A crofter's view

ON 17 MARCH 2017 six crofters will be elected to the board of the Crofting Commission. The organisation is the only public body in Scotland where the majority of board members are elected by the people it regulates, with three commissioners appointed by Scottish Ministers.

Crofters are able to put themselves forward to stand for election from 6 January 2017. Crofters are then urged to vote from 3 March 2017, ahead of the 16 March 2017 voting deadline.

Below is a case study from crofter Mairi MacKenzie, who explains the importance of the Crofting Commission's elections.

Mairi MacKenzie, from Lochbroom, Ullapool became a crofter in 1987 after her father gifted her a croft when she got married. Along with the croft, Mairi's father gave her some sheep, with which Mairi built her flock. After first being reluctant to take the croft on, Mairi is now both tenant and owner-occupier of croft land amounting to fifty hectares. Mairi runs a flock of 100 North Country Cheviot ewes and six pedigree Luing cows. In 1990 Mairi and her husband Kenny built their home, from which Mairi runs a four-star B&B in conjunction with working the croft.

In Mairi's township there are ten crofts and three active crofters who work hand-in-hand to ensure their smooth running. Managing the land and the grazing is key to the maintenance of Mairi's crofts. This entails moving the sheep out onto the common grazing at various times throughout the year.

Mairi said: "I'm very thankful for what I have. There's no better place to bring up a family and I take great pride in what I'm producing; it's great to see the livestock being born and bringing them through. I've spent the past 26 years building up the croft and restoring the land, with help from my family. The croft is vital for preserving not only the natural habitat here, but also the heritage of the area and our way of life. As custodians of the land it's a crofter's responsibility to maintain the land for the next generation.

"The crofting commissioners are a good way to have our voice heard, especially in changes of policy, so it's important to have people who are working the system involved. For that reason, I think whoever is elected should come from a crofting background and should have seen for themselves the highs and lows of crofting. We need an articulate person, who would be a strong voice on the behalf of crofters."

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMON GRAZINGS

Modernising the role of the grazings committee

To retain people in rural communities, writes William Swann, there must opportunity for economic growth and optimism for the future.

WHILST CROFTING was never intended to provide a family income, it must provide opportunity and deliver economic benefits. Unrealistic lifestyle choices do not pay the bills. There are two options for putting some profit into crofting. The first is to convert crofting to extensive hill farming. Some of the Argyll Islands have gone down this route and some townships are so depleted that a single crofter has control of all the croft land. This is in my view a short-sighted option, given the declining economic realities of hill farming and the nature of the land itself.

The alternative is to strengthen crofting by expanding and modernising the role of the grazings committee. Community development practitioners often look at communities in terms of

their assets. However, as well as the tangible assets such as land, people are crucial to the equation too. There is no point having land if the community lacks the skills and capacity to make optimal use of it. I will return to this point.

One of the deficiencies in crofting legislation is the failure to recognise the regional diversity of crofting. Orkney has large crofts, few if any communally managed hill grazings and a high percentage of owner occupancy. Lewis has small crofts, less owner occupancy and a strong tradition of communal land management. But the distinction goes deeper. Crofters in Orkney enjoy better quality land and form one part of a diverse business community, whereas in Lewis, in crofting areas, crofters are the community. Other areas fall somewhere between the extremes.

Where a strong tradition of communal management survives, it does so for a reason. Effective community structures were essential to the survival of those communities. Self-help is captured as a trendy byword in

the media but it is what traditional crofting communities have been doing for over a century. That is why a sense of community and effective communal structures are recognised as assets. If you can work together to manage a hill grazing for mutual benefit you can organise a renewable energy project, an affordable housing development or you can effectively manage community-owned land.

The challenge for grazings committees is to engage with the wider community and to embrace the growing regional diversity. New residents may not understand the crofting system and thus underestimate the value of land rights crofters hold in common. Crofters who fail to engage with the wider community cannot then expect that community to support crofting.

The argument for strengthening and expanding the role of grazings committees is that it puts crofters with access to land and a tradition of communal working at the heart of community development. It provides the opportunity for

economic development whilst supporting the environment. Ironically, demonstrating this potential may well be the best argument for increased agricultural support for crofting.

To achieve this potential the crofting act needs amendments which redefine and expand the role of grazings committees, supporting reasonable local autonomy, together with wider engagement between crofters and the communities in which they live. To achieve this, parts of the government need to shape up, particularly with regard to how rural support is managed so that crofting communities retaining a community-based approach benefit.

Crofting would also benefit from local identification and resolution of impediments to progress rather than putting the emphasis on imposed generalities such as absenteeism, which may not always be local priorities.

There might even be room for optimism.

Reflections on common grazings

This article was going to be about a proposal for a transnational network of common graziers, comments Gwyn Jones. But Fiona asked me to contribute some wider thoughts about common grazings at this difficult time. So here are some brief musings from an interested outsider, for what they're worth.

THE SCOTTISH SYSTEM of common grazings self-governance, underpinned by a statutory framework and a supporting state agency, is for all its faults the best in these islands. It should be something to treasure, nurture and develop.

In an age where millions of public money are spent on all sorts of things community, the starvation rations given to supporting common grazings governance is regrettable. Policy makers and policy lobbyists seem blind to the need – or at least completely unimaginative when it comes to funding mechanisms, despite their failures impacting on 20% of IACS claimants living in the most socio-economically vulnerable areas.

As recent events have shown, underfunding is not the only threat to common grazings and their governance. But it seems clear to me that the undermining didn't start and doesn't end with one individual. Some government decisions, such as rules regarding shareholders' consent for agri-environment, fall into the same pattern of emasculating grazings committees. Attitudes need to be changed and someone needs to change them.

Like parliamentary democracy, the law covering grazings regulation balances the need



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for democratic legitimacy with the need to get things done. That approach is a strength of the system, not a weakness.

Common grazings are not community-owned land. Whether they should be is not my point here. Governance of grazing management is for the benefit of graziers, taking into account the rights of potential graziers to become active at any time. This principle seems to me to be in danger. Other, new, activities could of course involve other stakeholders and maybe other governance principles. One size doesn't fit all.

The law is important; obeying the law is important. Blogging about the Commission bûrach has focussed quite rightly on whether or not their actions were lawful. But at some point, non-lawyers need to get involved. Maybe the law is an ass? Maybe it does need to be changed. A lot of fresh, innovative thinking went on in 1891 but a lot has changed since then; maybe it's time for another look at the whole system?

Want to network with other European common graziers?

In that context and that of Brexit, graziers might be forgiven for indulging in a period of prolonged navel-gazing.

But perhaps the best way to look at yourself and your situation is to compare it with others?

And while the Scottish system is good, if rather moribund in places and completely absent in others, it can still learn from legal, organisational and support frameworks elsewhere. And of course, people elsewhere will be interested to learn from Scotland.

Forming such a mutual support network has long been an ambition of mine. We had a successful meeting last year in Brussels. Now we want to meet again and take some joint action.

As you can imagine, getting funding for such networking is not easy. I'm trying to do it through LEADER, planning for a meeting in the very interesting area of SE Wales. But to do it, we need partners in the form of LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs).

It would be great if at least some crofters could be involved through one or more of the Highlands and Islands LAGs.

There's no room here to give you all the details, but to get them and more information on what to do next, contact me by email.

Gwyn Jones, EFNCP
dgl_jones@yahoo.co.uk

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMON GRAZINGS



© Martin Benson – Tthree

What makes a successful common grazing?

SAC's Janette Sutherland highlights some key attributes observed in successful common grazings, and suggests solutions where they are lacking.

BY THEIR VERY NATURE common grazings involve teamwork. However, if people don't have shared goals this can be a source of friction. In this first article of a series, I will focus solely on livestock management. In the following editions I will cover financial management, grants and agri-environment schemes. I will also discuss the organisation of grazing meetings and tailoring your regulations to suit your common grazing.

Common goals – bull policy

It is quite common for crofting herds to share a bull, often using the Crofting Commission bull, but which breed to choose can be problematic. One issue highlighted in QMS roadshows in the Western Isles was the problem of getting agreement to choose a native breed for heifer replacements. A solution might be for two neighbouring townships to co-operate – one chooses a native bull, the other a continental then select the cows from which they hope to get heifers and those that they hope to get store calves. The odds will not always be in your favour, but it does allow more flexibility.

Bull parks can remedy the issue of bulls not managing to keep up with the herd on harder hills. Fencing the bull parks and reseeded works (if land is suitable) can be funded under CAGS.

With small herds, there are benefits in sharing

bulls; these include less cost, as well as the potential for making bigger batches at sales if you sell as a township rather than as individuals.

Common goals – tup policy

If crofters choose to co-operate at tupping time, there must be agreement on the type of tups selected and the budget for buying them. Some crofters have scope to tup ewes on inbye ground so this discussion is not required. However, to increase fertility it is important that ewes have plenty of feed at tupping; so perhaps more co-operation and use of larger tup parks and supplementary feeding may be advisable in some situations.

Common goals – gathering

Gathering large common grazings can be very weather dependent. Mist often results in days being lost, problematic when sheep-keepers have varying flexibility for gathering days through off-croft employment. In some places extensive use of contract gathers ameliorates this problem. In many areas there is a shortage of skilled gatherers. Until drone technology replaces a man and dog, if it ever can, more passing-on of skills to younger crofters is required. Agreement on number and timing of health treatments, planned with the vet, can reduce the number of gathers.

Common goals – bio-security

Bio-security is all about ensuring that your herds and flocks are not exposed to new diseases and that disease challenges are prepared for and managed. By their nature, common grazings

usually involve the mixing of stock owned by various people in one area. This can be perceived as a weakness if the various owners have different standards of bio-security.

With some planning, common grazings – if they are fully stock-proof from others – can take part in health planning as one group. If there are open marches between commons but they co-operate with their neighbours, both can also take part in high-health schemes. There are impressive examples of this in various parts of the Western Isles and Shetland. To undertake these schemes successfully requires strong leadership, commitment from those involved and input from veterinary practices.

Common goals – stocking rates/soumings

Traditionally, soumings were set to ensure a few powerful crofters did not squeeze their neighbour's stock out of grazing. Although many commons are sadly not used by all shareholders, this does create an opportunity for committees to annually reallocate soumings so more stock can be put out on the common grazings by the active graziers. This control by the committee ensures that the grazing is not too heavily stocked as a whole.

One successful model is where livestock management is overseen by the committee, with rules tailored to suit the needs of shareholders. This will involve a good deal of communication and organisation – attributes which I will discuss in the next edition.

We will also discuss in the next issue how environmental management can affect soumings.



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BREXIT

In the shadow of Brexit

EVERYTHING WE DO, everything we plan, all conversation about development, is now done relative to what the situation will be if and when we leave the European Union.

We live in the shadow of Brexit. It is the great unknown, an amputation where the UK is the limb being cut off, with the dream of thriving as an independent body. We don't know how well the operation will go and what we will be post-op. We will survive, the consultants say, but will we thrive?

We know that in March 2017 Article 50 will be invoked and the operation begins; the clock will start ticking for the two-year severing of the flesh and bone and the untangling of the myriad of veins and nerves that comprise the UK



connection to the EU. It won't be easy. We hope that there is a skilled team of surgeons and nurses, and

we would really like an anaesthetic please, though it looks unlikely that one will be offered. It is going to hurt.

Whether Scotland is with the limb or the body after the operation is an unknown. We also don't know what the life-blood budget will be for Scotland, how it will be divided between sectors, how much will come to agriculture and rural development, how much of that will come to crofting, and so on. In other words, our food source is insecure.

But crofters are used to that and it is more important than ever that crofters stick together and have a collective voice in the negotiations that will have to take place to get a fair share.

Despite what happens, despite the many unknowns and the insecurity, despite the losses and opportunities, we can look forward to eventual disambiguation, the clarity that will follow as we come out of the shadow of Brexit.

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What hope for crofting post-Brexit?

Since we started crofting in the '80s, writes SCF member Bridie Pursey, we have seen improvements and opportunities that were clearly not available before UK-EU agreements began 40 years ago.

LIVE IN A COMMUNITY in the county of Sutherland. At the time when we were lucky enough to take on a tenancy, it was full of ruins and disused crofts.

Since then, crofting became more productive and progressive. Through encouraged diversification, we have been able to make ends meet and even given up other work to concentrate on the land, sometimes alongside tourist-related or educational crofting fields. We have witnessed others make wonderful transformations and support their young families on their crofts.

The landscape has improved with rewarded hard slog – you can see it in every township. People have been able to grow their own food and even sell on surplus. Trees have provided shelter and drainage. Housing is generally warm, light and spacious.

But boom days are passing and property does not sell. Disenchantment is growing. Young folk are moving out again, prospecting for their futures in a less secure world.

I now envisage a return to a crofting style that loses popularity and favour, as we return to a non-supported system: with folk seeing little benefit to toil and struggle, and I recognise full well the intentions of a right wing UK government. Even as a teenager living in England, I was fully aware that this sort of governance supported big business at cost to small business and welfare. Money will again be directed to defence for the sake of fuel and quick-buck efficiency, if we let it.

Maybe younger folk have hope. For how can they compare today with yesterday?

I am not unduly scared for myself, as I am no



© Martin Benson

longer young or as fit; neither do I have family interested in taking over from me. I now suffer from a slightly bleak outlook, while in the days before this change in our EU status, people saw me as forever optimistic! This worked in real time, as we were encouraged by small successes.

The "No" majority of the independence referendum was bound to lead to a breakdown in European relations... it was related to the past and not the future. Other EU states could understand

the confidence that allowed a vote in Scotland, but the drag from the result undermines dreams, which are an essential part of the innovative progress.

We had hoped for a better world and more fairness across the board, but we will surely return to a society that many of my generation thought was history in the developed world.

We do need to have our eyes open. Scotland is neither disposable nor refundable.

ON THE CROFT

New advice service for crofters and small farms



© Martin Benson - Three

A NEW ADVICE SERVICE has been launched for crofters and small farms – the Farm Advisory Service (FAS).

FAS will run until the end of December 2020 and is part of the Scottish Rural Development Programme, co-funded by the EU and Scottish Government. Delivering the £20m contract will be SAC Consulting, part of Scotland's Rural College, and Ricardo Energy and Environment. It is supported by a website and a telephone advice line for farmers and crofters.

Included in the items offered by the integrated FAS service is grant support, a full programme of meetings and events, a range of articles and publications and a special subscription service for crofts and small farms. Some aspects of the service are free, whilst more tailored advice is provided at a discount.

Croft and small farm advisory service

This feature will provide discounted subscription and consultancy services for crofters and small farming businesses (under 30 Ha) across Scotland. The croft and small farm subscription follows on from the popular SAC crofters' subscription. It provides two hours of advice from SAC Consulting advisers plus other discounts and benefits.

Advice line

The free advice line operates from Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Advisers will either answer your query at the time or ask a colleague to call you back. The number is 0300 323 0161.

The advice line can cover a wide variety of topics including cross-compliance (eg sheep tagging rules, safe distances for spreading fertiliser, storage of draff); biodiversity and conservation (eg improving habitats, controlling pests); business efficiency measures (eg liming grassland, feeding livestock) and many other technical issues.

Events and discussion groups

On-farm meetings are great ways to see what others are doing, catch up and learn new information and techniques. Many events are planned for the winter, along with evening meetings, to keep crofters and farmers up to date with schemes and technical information. Discussion groups will be organised to help crofters and farmers get together to tackle problems, develop skills and learn from the experience of others.

New entrants

This year, Caithness and Skye areas have

meetings specifically for new entrants to crofting or farming. Aimed at anyone thinking of starting in crofting or farming, or younger members of an existing business, these workshops will cover a variety of start-up topics, including other support that is available to new entrants from the Scottish Government.

Website

The developing website is growing into a source of data and information, including tools and apps, all designed to be relevant to modern farming and crofting enterprises. At its centre is a calendar of events with details of all the workshops, network farm meetings, conferences and training courses that will be planned and delivered as part of FAS.

The website also hosts the entry point for grant applications for Integrated Land Management Plans (ILMP); specialist advice; mentoring for new entrants; and carbon audits. Application forms can now be downloaded from the website, which provide access to up to £2,200 grant assistance for ILMP and £500 for carbon audits.

Over the coming weeks the new Farm Advisory Service will expand into a comprehensive delivery package of practical information and advice to farmers and crofters across Scotland. Full details are available on the Farm Advisory Service website (www.fas.scot/crofters-small-farms), from the advice line or your local SAC office.

Siobhan Macdonald, SAC Consulting, Portree



National Advice Hub
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© Skye Birds

Sea eagles soar

A NEW REPORT from Scottish Natural Heritage predicts that the population of white-tailed eagles in Scotland could double within ten years, reaching 221 pairs by 2025. These figures do not take account of juvenile birds that have yet to settle and establish territories.

Depending on your standpoint, this is either a conservation success story or a further threat to the viability of the hill livestock industry. Either way the success of a species at the top of the food chain should not come as a surprise, but it should put out of the question any further introduction of predators such as lynx and wolves.

There is an arrogance amongst those campaigning for such introductions, implying that resulting losses of livestock are in some way acceptable. We have to remember that the range of the white-tailed eagle was artificially extended

before the impact of the original reintroduction had been evaluated.

We are where we are, and the sea eagle management scheme is there to assist crofters and farmers suffering losses from sea eagle predation. Assistance can be for capital expenditure to improve facilities, or for additional feeding, scanning and labour costs. The scheme is administered through stakeholder groups covering Wester Ross, Skye and Lochalsh and Argyll.

The Skye group has so far approved 21 applications for assistance with a further nine pending. Crofters suffering sea eagle predation of livestock should first contact their local SNH office and also copy reports to SCF head office.

Thanks are due to Jake Sayles, NFUS Portree, for his hard work in making the Skye and Lochalsh stakeholder group work effectively.

ON THE CROFT

Donald's hortiblog



ONCE AGAIN the little October summer has not failed us; in fact it has left us with a bit of a dilemma.

We find ourselves, at the start of November, with a polytunnel full of tomatoes still ripening off very nicely. The problem is that we need to get that ground cleared, turned and manured for our overwintering crop of onions and garlic. So very soon the remaining ripe fruit will be processed into soup or sauce. Then it will be time to gather the first load of seaweed of the season.

The thing is that, just as with livestock, the back end of the year is not really the finish of the season, but the start. With the protection of a polytunnel, ground preparation can be done anytime and, if ground is not required for winter cropping, sowing a green manure crop is a very good idea, especially on light or impoverished soils that need bulking up.

Green manure mixtures are available from

most seed companies, and the idea is to sow them now and dig the plant residue into the soil in the spring. This doesn't really work outdoors this far north, but soil should always be covered over if possible to avoid leaching of nutrients over the winter. We apply a thick covering of seaweed, but heavy-grade black polythene, the kind used for covering silage pits, can be used, well weighted down with tyres. This will also suppress weeds and help to warm the soil for an earlier start in the spring.

It's a good time of year to be thinking about planting trees and hedges for shelter. It's something that benefits all crofting activities and any loss of grazing land is compensated by earlier grass growth and shelter for crops and animals. By sheltering the house it can reduce heating costs too. Trees can be planted any time in the dormant season. Success depends on sourcing hardy stock, looking after the plants until well

established and protection against deer and rodents. SCF's woodland handbook, obtainable from head office, gives very good advice. Shelter belt planting is supported by CAGS.

Before the winter sets in, polytunnels should be given a check over. Attending to small holes and tears at this stage can prolong the life of the cover. Also, if it's in contact with any metal or wooden parts these should be padded with bubble wrap, rags or any soft material. We may be due a snowy winter, and heavy snow loading can be disastrous for a polytunnel. It's good to be prepared with a length of rope with rags tied every couple of feet. Two people can pull this back and forward over the top of the tunnel and this will prevent a build-up of snow.

Next, sit by the fire with a dram, study the seed catalogues, and plan the new season's crops.

Pigs and whistles

Having assigned a croft to my daughter Margaret, writes IG Macdonald, little did I think that she would soon be leading us a merry dance with her choice of livestock.

FIRST IT WAS Luna the border collie, bought from a mountain shepherd in the north of Italy.

Then, not content with common or garden blackies, Margaret chose five Soay sheep from Aberdeenshire. Four coloured ewes proved docile and friendly and were duly mated with a pure-bred Soay tup from the Jacksons at Orbost. An assortment of black, brown and beige lambs were the interesting result.

Her next purchase was five in-lamb Shetland sheep from Gairloch. Two of these, far from docile, had acquired high-jump skills disproportionate to their size and an exasperated Magnus Burd had great difficulty in incarcerating them in his trailer to bring them to Skye. They seemed intent to make their way back to Badacro on the slightest excuse. The old man put his foot down and decreed that Stella and Cookie definitely were for the high jump.

Now it's pigs. The children were intrigued. "If pigs are made of bacon, how can they stand up?"

said Matteo.

A retired oil storage tank and an electric fence were installed around an area of bog myrtle to provide a workplace for two Tamworth piglets. Their duty was to dig up roots and plough the soil.

We settled on two boars and the result has certainly not been boredom. Jessie's plan to call one Myrtle had to be changed and she settled for Hurtle. Hurtle was soon to live up to his name, or was it Matteo's one, Bolt?

In constant rain we transferred the road-trailer to the quad for transportation to the pig patch. Due to swampy ground, the poor quad could not make it uphill. Getting two traumatized pigs from one trailer to another when there is a piglet-sized gap between the two wagons and rain is flooding down the backs of our necks caused much hilarity, but we managed to get both into their compound. Off we went to get them a feed.

At this point Bolt bolted, or Hurtle hurtled, through the electric fence with a loud shriek. Luckily his companion took a shock on his nose and remained at home. The high-speed piglet, preferring company to freedom, sped once round the house before diving back with another shriek through the electric fence.

Interesting conversation between the kids:



Let's get another dog, one that doesn't bark. We don't need a dog, we have pigs, they don't bark.

That's so silly, of course pigs don't bark. Not as silly as dogs that don't bark, that's really silly!

What adventures have we to look forward to next?

ON THE CROFT

The elements combined



WIND, RAIN, fresh air and temperature. All factors from our varied climate that have separate and additive effects on animals and plants. With regard to the combined effect on our livestock, we need all four factors to be within certain ranges to maximise health and productivity. When one or more factors are outside the neutral or positive range of values, productivity will suffer. When such environmental conditions persist, the impact on a plant or animal is one of stress, leading to weakness and a large increase in the risk of succumbing to disease. Hence a fundamental link between environment and health.

The target for livestock is to create an environment that moderates the impact of climatic factors, but without creating new extremes. The logic that creates a shelter for livestock that eliminates the impact of wind is understandable, for elevated air speed removes energy. However, a solid wall not only moderates the wild wind, but also prevents the delivery of fresh air. All the tight wee sheds scattered across the landscape may be protecting from the wind but will be far damper inside than necessary, because natural ventilation is reduced. Dampness makes a low temperature feel colder and is a bonus to a number of bacteria and viruses that create health problems. Fresh air kills many bugs; reduce fresh air and increase the risk of disease.

Casual observation for almost 40 years of the arrival of spring across the breadth of Scotland, from Aberdeen to Ardnamurchan, suggests that plant growth in the west of Scotland starts around three weeks before the east. This varied difference disappeared for the last two winters, and neither winter was particularly cold. Temperatures were seldom below zero. Last winter was continually damp. The previous winter had significant periods of increased air speeds. Different environment factors, combined with a reasonable level of a third that dragged energy out of the whole system and by default caused a delay in plant growth. The elements combined.

So what do we need for our livestock to protect them from the combined elements? In the absence of shelter belts and free-draining ground on which to lie down, they need shelter that does not create new extremes. Buildings must facilitate the delivery of fresh air, but keep out the extremes of wind and rain. Buildings need porous walls above animal height, and a hole in the roof to let the stale air out when the wind dies down. We have fresh air in abundance; let us use it to better effect.

Jamie Robertson

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Aberdeen; AB11 5DE

An update on Ovine Pulmonary Adenocarcinoma

from Moredun Research Institute

OVINE PULMONARY Adenocarcinoma (OPA) or *Jaagsiekte* is often described as an iceberg disease because only a small proportion of cases are ever reported or seen by vets.

We know that some flocks suffer very large losses with more than 20% of adult sheep dying of OPA in one year, although most affected flocks lose 1-5% of sheep to OPA every year, which is a continuous drain on profitability as well as an issue of animal welfare. Even though the majority of flocks and sheep do not have OPA, the disease is considered by many to be a major threat to the sheep industry.

OPA is notable in that it is a cancer caused by a virus (*Jaagsiekte* sheep retrovirus or JSRV). This virus causes cells in the lung to become cancerous and these cells then produce more virus which can infect new areas of the lung, or new sheep. OPA spreads between sheep but not to humans or other animals, except goats. It is spread in air and also in milk or colostrum.

Sheep with OPA appear thin with increased respiratory effort. They may survive for many weeks after the signs of disease appear, or may die suddenly. Often large amounts of clear or frothy fluid may come from the affected lungs, appearing as discharge dripping or pouring from the nose. This fluid contains large quantities of JSRV so it is important to remove affected sheep from the flock and disinfect this material as the virus can survive for several weeks in a

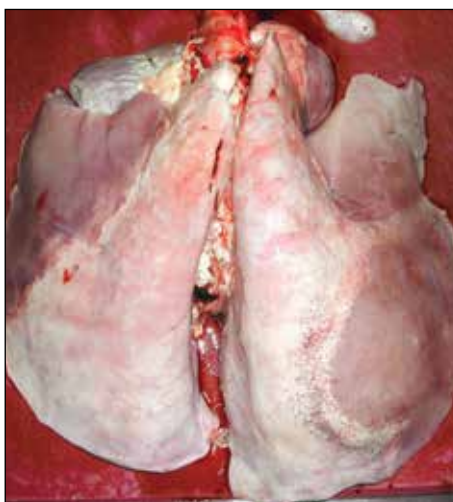
cool, wet environment. It is important to note that the early stages of OPA cannot be clinically diagnosed as the tumours are too small to cause any breathing problems even though they are able to produce virus which can infect other sheep.

Moredun's current OPA research is predominantly aimed at developing tests to diagnose early OPA in order to enable test-and-cull in affected flocks, to provide assurance that sheep to be purchased do not carry the disease and eventually to eradicate OPA. We are also working with Dr Phil Scott (Capital Veterinary Services) using the well-established technique of ultrasound to diagnose OPA at an earlier stage than is possible from clinical signs.

The method can reliably detect OPA tumours of 2cm or more at the ventral surfaces of the lungs. However, it will never guarantee that a sheep is free of OPA because it cannot detect the very smallest tumours. We are now using the ultrasound technique to determine whether screening flocks over several years and removing all sheep identified with OPA will successfully reduce or eliminate the disease in these flocks.

Other aspects of our research include studies on how the virus is able to cause OPA and whether we can identify genes associated with susceptibility or resistance to OPA in sheep.

For further information please contact
Dr Chris Cousens:
Chris.Cousens@moredun.ac.uk



The typical OPA signs of weight loss and increased respiratory effort after exercise and at rest could apply to many other diseases. Post mortem examination of the lungs is necessary for disease confirmation. In these lungs the dark areas are tumour. The affected right lung is much larger than the left.



Using ultrasound scanning for on-farm screening for OPA

ON THE CROFT

Dùnan math innearach – màthair na ciste mine

BHA MI ANN am fìor cheann a deas na h-Alba an t-seachdain seo chaidh – Maol nan Gall – ann an siorrachd Wigtown, a tha na dùthaich ghorm-fheurach far a bheil crodh-bainne rim faicinn fad is farsainn. Mar sin tha pailteas inneir ann airson an talamh a mhathachadh agus leis an t-side thioram a bh' ann o chionn goirid chunnaic mi na tractaran a-mach ag innearadh sna h-achaidhean. Tha na tuathanasan den t-seòrsa seo a' stòradh a' bhuachair 's a' mhùin bhon chrodh còmhla gus an gabh a am pumpadh a-mach air an talamh le tancair air cùl tractair.

Thug seo orm smaointinn air diofar dhòighean air an talamh a leasachadh. Bha mi an sàs ann am pròiseact air àiteachas eachdraidheil san t-samhradh agus ann an còmhraidhean ri seann chroitèaran chuala mi daoine toirt iomradh air òtrach, dùnan, tòrr sitig,



flagais agus lagais – ach chan eil an seo ach diofar ainmean air buachar a chàmhadh. 'S e innear a' chruidh am prìomh rud a bha dol sa fhlagais ach bhiodh e cumanta flagais a thogail ann an dòigh gu math pongail.

Fhuair mi iomradh bho Uibhist a Deas air mar a bha daoine a' dèanamh "flagais" tràth san

fhicheadamh linn. Bhiodh iad a' cur tonn do dh'innear na thòrr air an talamh. Chuireadh iad an uair sin uiread eile de thodhar a' chladaich air a' mhùin sin. Rachadh an uair sin cùrsa den innear a chur a rithist ann – innear agus todhar a' chladaich mu seach. Dh'fhàgadh iad an fhlagais tron gheamhradh, a' grodadh gus am biodh iad ga

h-aiseag don talamh àitich san earrach.

B' aithne dhomh bodach ann am Muile a bhiodh ag innse mar a dhèanadh e "dùnan". Bhiodh e a' càrnadh innear, feamainn (todhar a' chladaich) agus raineach ann an cùrsaichean air muin a chèile agus nuair a bhiodh sin air grodadh 's e sin a chuireadh e air iomaire a' bhuntàta. Tha seo inntinneach chionn bha mi leughadh, an latha eile, pàipear air raineach bho Roinn an Àiteachais ann an Oilthigh Obar Dheadhain. Bha am pàipear ag innse mu na feartan sònraichte aig raineach: 's iad sin pH àrd, potash is nitrogen àrd agus gu h-inntinneach "flavonoids" aig a bheil buadh an aghaidh fungi leithid a dh'adhbhraicheas gaiseadh sa bhuntàta. Mar sin dh'fhaoidte gun robh eòlas bho ghnàths aig na seann daoine a chuireadh iongnadh oirne!

le Gabhan Mac a' Phearsain

Cutting-edge advice at Scuddaburgh drainage event



Gavin Elrick views drain at Skye event

WHILE THE DEMONSTRATION of a remote-controlled rush cutter proved an attraction and talking point for the strong turnout of crofters and land managers at a recent event at Scuddaburgh in Uig, Isle of Skye, it was more down-to-earth discussions about field drainage that many focussed on.

The meeting was one of the first organised under the Scottish Government's newly-launched Farm Advisory Service (FAS), delivered by SAC Consulting, part of Scotland's Rural College. It featured advice from SAC's Huntly-based drainage expert Gavin Elrick and included a working digger and discussions about drainage planning and repair.

With 30 crofters and farmers in attendance, Gavin Elrick covered his basic rules about drainage, beginning with a proper understanding of the issues.

"Before starting what can be an expensive and time-consuming job it's best to check all the existing open drains and clean them out if necessary," he told them. "That means cleaning and repairing pipe outlets and marking them so they can be easily identified. I like to use a painted post on the ditch bank."

Gavin also recommended that after cleaning and repairing any existing drainage, it is best to allow the system to work for a year before installing any new drains.

"Before you check for problem areas wait, if you can, until the weather has been reasonably dry for a period of time. Then carry out test excavations to identify exactly what the problems are and prepare a drainage design."

If it was necessary to install new drains, Gavin urged them to use approved materials and, if gravel backfill is needed, to install clean graded gravel or crushed rock, the ideal grade being 20-40mm. Finally draw a map of any new pipe drains that are installed and don't lose it!

Elsewhere at the event conservation adviser Gillian McKnight of SAC Consulting discussed what to do with land that won't respond as well to drainage, including how to make a wader scrape and meeting other demands of the various farmland wading birds.

The remote controlled McConnel Robocut, operated by a local contractor, also drew a lot of interest and questions about how best to tackle rushes through soil management and chemical treatment. The machine can work on slopes up to 55 degrees and clear grass or bracken, rushes, gorse and small trees. It is controlled by an operator standing some distance away from the action, keeping the operator much safer.

Further information about drainage, rush control and soil management will be available on the new FAS website, alongside some short video clips taken at the meeting.

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New crofts for Sleat set an example



© Bidwells property consultants

LOCAL LANDOWNER Clan Donald Lands Trust in Sleat, Isle of Skye, recently offered onto the market three new crofts in Tarscavaig via Bidwells property consultants.

The new Gillean township crofts have planning permission in principle for a croft house on each and are sold under crofting tenure. The crofts extend to between approximately 6.33 acres (2.565 Ha) and 7.91 acres (3.204 Ha).

Former farm land, the ground is predominantly rough hill along with areas of in-bye land. Each croft includes a share to Gillean common grazing which extends to approximately 50 Ha.

Young local individuals/families who live within

16 km of the Gillean township can apply for a discounted rate for two of the crofts.

Sleat General grazing committee broadly welcomed the initiative and wished the development all possible success, commenting that Clan Donald have taken a bold step.

In an initial proposal a few years previously, the estate was strongly criticised for offering smaller units with no grazings share. The Crofters Commission endorsed the proposal, raising concerns by SCF and others over their perception of the viability of crofting. It is good to see that Clan Donald Lands Trust has taken on board the comments made at the time of their

original proposal, and now offer these crofts which appear to be workable holdings, giving new young local crofters a chance to become established on the land in an area with high house and house site values.

Let's hope that this is the start of a process of more crofts being created both on Skye and throughout the Highlands and Islands. Where there is a will and a commitment to keeping populations in remote areas, crofting provides the answer.

For more information on the Tarscavaig crofts, contact Angus Kelly at Bidwells' Fort William office, tel 01397 702433.

£4m fund for self-build projects in the Highlands

LOANS OF UP TO £175,000 are now available to help people build their own homes in the Highlands.

The Scottish Government's £4 million Highland

Self-Build Loan Fund, launched in April 2016, provides opportunities for people to self- and custom-build homes across the region, with applicants able to apply for up to £175,000 to help towards their builds.

The Highland Self Build Loan Fund is a pilot scheme which aims to revitalise what was once the main housing delivery model in the Highlands and to regenerate growth in the self-build sector. Administered by The Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust (HSCHT), the fund is now accepting applications.

The fund will increase economic activity in the area and provide financial

assistance to people who have in recent years been unable to progress with their self-build projects.

Housing minister Kevin Stewart said: "This £4 million Self-Build Loan Fund is an important opportunity to address the lending difficulties experienced by households looking to build their own homes, and to explore how we can increase housing supply while allowing customers to input into the design."

The fund is already providing loans which are allowing development to take place across the Highlands, including in smaller rural communities where new-build housing is scarce. This will help meet the housing needs of the community and will therefore prevent outward migration and boost local employment and skills.

This new fund could prove massively beneficial to crofting communities. HSCHT has already started awarding funding to projects being built on decrofted plots, allowing the individuals and families to live adjacent to their crofts.

For more information, contact HSCHT on 01463233548, or at selfbuild@hscht.co.uk.

A brochure and application pack can also be downloaded from www.hsch.co.uk. Twitter @SelfBuildFund.

For the full brochure visit www.hsch.co.uk

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Wild meat boosts mountain business

Tamara Griffiths is a writer and graduate in mountain studies from the University of the Highlands and Islands who studied remotely from her home in Italy's spectacular Monti Sibillini National Park. She became interested in crofting when Fiona was working on an issue of The Crofter while staying in her holiday cottage, seeing similarities between local mountain culture and crofting. Here she describes an innovative local project making use of meat which would previously have been discarded after a cull. Lessons from goose meat in the islands, maybe?

THE HABITAT OFFERED by the Monti Sibillini National Park in central Italy suits wild boar so well that there comes a point when numbers become too prolific; as part of the park's conservation work a controlled cull is agreed.

Amedeo Tuccini runs an attractive rifugio (mountain refuge) located in the Monti Sibillini Park, at Altino, 1045 metres altitude. He has been a leading person in a project working with the park to make use of this culled meat.

As readers will know, wild meat can't be processed in the same way as industrially-farmed meat due to health regulations. Wild boar may carry a number of diseases that are transmissible to humans, such as *Trichina*. In the past it was impossible to sell culled wild boar. After years of work, the park has been able to fulfil EU regulations and now has wild meat specially



controlled and processed at two pre-existing slaughterhouses.

This year the park set a target to cull 1,500 wild boar. What would otherwise have been wasted meat now represents a micro-economy. Despite the recession, Amedeo is opening a second rifugio inside the park. Similar to the structure

at Altino, this rifugio changed hands frequently due to lack of profitability. Many struggle to make these small mountain rifugio financially viable.

"The wild boar meat is a big part of it," he replies when I ask why his business is such a success.

The rifugio at Altino (www.rifugioaltino.it) has become renowned for the wild boar dish they serve, which was featured at Milan Expo 2016.

"We are listed in the top 17 of the 800 most recommended restaurants on Trip Advisor for this area. The wild boar dish we make has become famous. People come from Rome just to try it," Amedeo explains.

Apart from the amazing taste of the meat, the fame of this dish is also due to another ingredient. The wild boar is served with the *Mele Rosa* (Pink Apple), a heritage food listed in the Slow Food Ark of foods to be protected. In the 1980s a few cultivators in the mountains realised they possessed the last of these apple trees and formed an action group. Now this particularly crisp and tangy historic wild apple has become a heritage food promoted by the region.

"The *Mele Rosa* grows wild right here at Altino. I go to the specified hunting sites near Altino, so these foods are really local. This apple with the boar is a very traditional dish. When people come to mountains, most people want traditional food. But high quality. That's why this dish has been such a success," Amedeo says.

For more on this story visit <http://bit.ly/2eQI3TP>



The three (Point & Sandwick) turbines you see were erected in 2015 and so far are the largest community wind farm in the UK (producing 9MW). The Aignish turbines will be in the distance to the right of the photo.

Dear editor

The crofting communities of Point and Sandwick on the Isle of Lewis are taking control of their own affairs. Three townships, Melbost and Branahue, North Street Sandwick and Aignish have submitted Section 50b applications to the Crofting Commission following unanimous support from their shareholders.

These applications will directly rival development plans on the same grazings by a private consortium led by energy giant Electricité de France which is 85% owned by the French Government.

The Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2007 allows for a wide range of community developments on crofting land and gives powers to the Commission to override landowners who may be opposed.

Community landlord the Stornoway Trust is expected to oppose the applications as the trustees signed away all development rights over the land to Lewis Wind Power, the multinational consortium led by EDF and Amec Foster Wheeler. This 25-year lease was secretly negotiated without any consultation with the crofters and prevents them from developing their own energy schemes.

Crofters were astonished to learn that the

Stornoway Trust accepted a derisory offer by LWP (about £600,000 per annum community benefit) while the two multinationals will enjoy profits of up to £30 million per annum over 25 years.

It makes more sense for all of the townships (working together) to develop their own land and keep what is a huge sum of money for the benefit of all the people of the Western Isles. This is a terrific opportunity which must be grasped.

Yours etc

Donnie M MacDonald
Aignish, Isle of Lewis

TRAINING

Croft woodland project training and demonstration events

THE CROFT WOODLANDS Project offers crofters, smallholders and common grazings committees free technical support and advice and help with grant applications. The project is active throughout all the crofting counties, with three regional advisers covering Argyll and Lochaber, the Highlands and Northern Isles and the Western Isles.

In spring 2017 the project will be offering training and demonstration events as part of the SCF's Crofters and Smallholders Skills Boost Project. These events will be free to crofters, smallholders and land managers (£40/session for others).

Come along and find out more about planting and managing trees on the croft.

Ground preparation for tree planting

Point, Isle of Lewis, late January/early February 2017 (half day)

- How to prepare ground for tree planting: what kind of cultivation for the ground conditions?
- Machine mounding/manual mounding/

screeing demo and practice.

- Suitable for potential contractors and hands-on planters.

Tree-planting technique

Point, Isle of Lewis/West side, Isle of Lewis/Harris, February 2017 (half day)

- How to give trees the best start: pre-planting care, matching species to ground conditions, planting technique, fertilising, protection, aftercare, weeding.
- Suitable for potential contractors and hands-on planters.

Croft woodland workshop

Kilmartin, Argyll, early March 2017 (one day)

With woodland manager Gordon Gray-Stephens.

- Woodland establishment, managing trees for timber, adding value to trees and timber, managing woods for shelter and stock, grants and licences, tree health and managing invasive species.
- Short indoor session followed by a site visit to local woods.

- Course content can be adapted to suit the audience.
- Suitable for crofters and smallholders who have existing woodland, or want to plant new woodland.

Tree-planting technique

Isle of Skye, March 2017 (half day)

- How to give trees the best start: pre-planting care, matching species to ground conditions, planting technique, fertilising, protection, aftercare, weeding.
- Suitable for potential contractors and hands-on planters.

For further information and to reserve a place on any of the courses, please contact Donna Williamson on training@crofting.org or telephone: 01343 209384.

For information about the Croft Woodlands Project, or to arrange a site visit from one of the project officers, please email crofting@woodlandtrust.org or telephone: 0343 770 5847.



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SCF YOUNG CROFTERS

Crofting and countryside skills

SCF young crofter Maddy Norval shares her enjoyment of the crofting course she is attending

STARTED THE Crofting and Countryside Skills course in Broadford, Skye in September and have had so much fun so far!

There are eight of us on the course and a real mix of backgrounds, ages and personalities, but we have all meshed together as a group really well. Everyone has a different reason for doing the course. Some people have crofts and want to learn to manage them. There are a couple potentially inheriting crofts. Some of us want to broaden our skillset for contracting work; and we all want to learn how to live a more sustainable, hands-on life. It runs for eight months, finishing in June, and we will have our National Certificate and seven industry awards by the end.

The first couple of weeks we went on a field trip to learn habitat mapping and wildlife observations. We did some moorland sampling at Loch Coruisk to see the effects of deer grazing pressure on John Muir Trust land. We also went on a tour of Balmacara Estate. They run a croft

subsidy scheme which encourages rotational cropping and like to see hay meadows cut after 1st of August to ensure wildflower seed has set. More wildflowers means more insects which in turn means more wee birdies. And we saw plenty of wee birdies – linnets, redpolls, fieldfares, finches and pipits were flocking overhead while ranger Gavin Skipper explained the benefits of silverweed and vetch to us.

In week three we were in the Broadford and Strath Community Company allotments putting up a new polytunnel for them. That's team-building for sure! Lots of mud and water as the site is on a peat bog, but thankfully no wind when we put the covering on.

We have also been taught about woodland management – how and why to prune a tree correctly – so we did some aesthetic pruning in Balmacara Square, removing branches from pathways. Risk assessments and chainsaw maintenance go hand in hand so we were taught both of those on the same day.

We've been doing livestock management in Plockton, moving sheep and cattle, repairing fences, learning about hay making and shearing;



The team at work

and this week we did a taster session of dry-stane dyking in the rain at Torrin! The whole course has been full on since day one and we finish every day exhausted but smiling, laughing and with a sense of accomplishment.

Rough-as-guts Croft House Bothy B&B

SCF young crofter Robin Haig describes her innovative tourist enterprise

THE IDEA TO do bed and breakfast in the old croft house, which has not been lived in since 1984, came from brainstorming ways to make an income from the croft.

It was partly an experiment to see what we could do using only what we had, but it was also because we believe in the healing power of reconnecting with nature and getting back to basics. So, like dressing a film set, my father and I arranged the old house, and it has been booked solid since going live on Airbnb in August.

Airbnb is an online marketplace that connects hosts listing their spaces with travelers searching for accommodation in over 190 countries.

On the website we describe our place as "an old croft house, rough-as-guts, hidden on a hillside between the Five Sisters of Kintail and Eilean Donan Castle. It's luxury, but not as we know it. No fluffy white towels here. It is the chance to escape from it all and get back to basics and simplicity."

There is no running water and no shower. The toilet is across the yard; to wash guests use an old wash jug and basin or bathe in the burn. Breakfast is a simple bannock.



The old croft house as it is advertised on the Airbnb website

The inspiration for the rough-as-guts approach came from an advertising agency I worked at in Amsterdam called Kesselskramer. They did a campaign for the Hans Brinker Budget Hotel. It was a dive, so rather than trying to make it sound nice they decided to say how rubbish it was. Now it's famous, they're famous and people come from far and wide to stay there. Simplicity and honesty is appreciated.

The people who have stayed at our bothy range from those who like the outdoors to people with suitcases on wheels who have never lit a fire. They come because they want to experience something different and they love what they find. In the few months we have been hosting, we

have learnt that people appreciate the simplicity of the space, that they love to chop firewood, brush their teeth in the burn and have a blether with a local. We will keep our experiment going and are thinking about other sorts of back-to-basics accommodation that we could offer, continuing the idea of utilising what is already on our croft.

Guest reviews:

"The bothy is as described and you will find in its simplicity a richness undescrivable for mind and body."

"Staying gives a little taste of what a traveler might have experienced in the 1800s stopping by a croft, with the washbowl and pitcher and fine

hospitality."

"Totally magical, go if you believe in the restorative powers of mother nature, peace, tranquility and bannock."

"Never stayed anywhere like it, I would go back in a heart-beat."

To view the listing on Airbnb visit www.airbnb.co.uk/rooms/14318713

Robin Haig is a filmmaker and young crofter. She directed the SCF documentary *Crofting's New Voices* and shares Carr and Wester Keppoch croft near Dornie with her father Niall Haig. To see her film work visit www.robinhaig.com

CROFTING CONNECTIONS

An absolutely brilliant day with Crofting Connections

THE NEW SCHOOL year started with an 'absolutely brilliant day' for 29 pupils from Logie Primary in Moray.

Crofting Connections was supported by Rachel Turner from the Royal Northern Countryside Initiative and artist-felters Christine and Kirsty from Diva Designs, to give the whole school a day-long experience of life on a croft. They visited Wester Lawrenceton near Forres, a five-acre organic mixed family farm, the size of a small croft.

The aim of the day was to give pupils and staff an introduction to crofting, including small-scale food production and wool production; to get a taste of healthy local food, looking at traditional and contemporary crops and horticultural practices; and to contribute to the pupils' research on keeping laying hens, building on their experience of hatching eggs from the farm a year ago and helping them with their plans to develop a croft on the school grounds.

The children heard how the welfare of the goat, the small flock of Gotland sheep and the commercial and rare-breed poultry were a top priority for farmer Nick. The Scots Dumpy and Light Sussex hens are moved round the garden where they turn over and fertilise the soil. The

ducks weed and catch slugs in the vegetable patch and the guinea fowl guards the commercial Lohman hens against foxes. The children collected eggs, 'some eggs were still warm!' and saw how 'the light on the [egg] grading machine helps Nick to spot any cracks before he sells them to shops and bakeries'.

In the garden and orchard they got a chance to help harvest the bere, dig potatoes, learn about crop rotation, and gather fruit and veg to create a rainbow. They saw just how much can be grown in small polytunnels. 'We saw tomatoes growing in the polytunnels. We tried some at lunchtime and they were delicious.'

Inside the children milled grain, made bannocks and felted some Gotland fleece 'to make our very own bouncy ball'. Some children tried things they had never tasted before such as Mirabelle plums, rocket and traditional mutton broth, which proved very popular.

'Pythagoras (the goat) wanted to return to school with us. Some children wanted to stay on the farm!'

'Today was an absolutely brilliant day. We have learned so much about different jobs on a farm and how some of the materials created on a farm can be used.'



Collecting eggs



Collecting fruit and vegetables to make a rainbow



Traditional bere grown in rotation with heritage tatties and garden peas



From fleece to bouncy ball – pupils made felted balls from the Gotland fleeces produced on the farm



Gotland sheep have good fleece for felting



Light Sussex hens help to compost garden waste

Sheep farming and the EU environment

An excerpt from EFNCP's contribution to the EU Sheep Meat Forum

COMPARED WITH other agricultural sectors, sheep farming is of relatively small economic importance for the EU as a whole and in most member states, even those with a large part of EU production, such as UK and Spain. Yet sheep farming is a predominant land use over very large areas of land, especially in the more marginal regions of the Atlantic and Mediterranean zones, where it plays a fundamental role in issues such as landscape, biodiversity, soil, wildfires and human presence. The great territorial importance of sheep farming in Europe is in marked contrast to its small economic significance.

As with most farming sectors, sheep production can have negative and positive environmental effects. Sheep farming systems stand out particularly for their potentially beneficial effects over large areas of environmentally-fragile marginal farmland that is mostly composed of semi-natural vegetation. Sheep farming can contribute to many important environmental targets, such as:

- environmentally positive integration with low-intensity farm management such as rainfed arable systems of Mediterranean regions and small-scale mixed livestock farming in the more remote parts of the Atlantic region;
- low-carbon-footprint livestock production, with limited external inputs and based on pasture resources with no other alternative use that only livestock grazing can transform efficiently into food;
- maintenance of pasturelands composed of valued habitats – marshes, steppe lands, coastal grasslands and heaths, moorlands and alpine grasslands – as well as managed farmland components including semi-natural grasslands, hay meadows and cultivated



© Martin Benson – Tree

areas;

- minimising shrub and tree encroachment in valued open and diverse pastoral landscapes, at a scale that is important for Europe's open-ground flora and fauna, including numerous endangered species;
- wildfire prevention, especially (but not exclusively) in Mediterranean regions, thus avoiding a cycle of fire and soil erosion that can lead to severe land degradation.

Despite all the environmental potential benefits, the CAP does not offer enough support for the sheep farms that provide most of these public goods. The 2015 CAP reform confronted livestock farmers using pastures containing trees, shrubs or other landscape features with increased difficulties to receive EU support. Across most of Europe, the eligibility of such woody pastures for direct payments has been reduced, in some cases very drastically (eg Spain, with a 60% reduction), discouraging sheep farming and increasing the risks of land abandonment.

Pillar 1 payments on permanent pastures vary hugely between countries, with very low payments per hectare in some countries (eg Spain, applying minimal convergence), very high payments in some others (eg in Northern Ireland) and a range of payment levels in between. Coupled payments for livestock show a wide range of payment levels

between countries. In some cases there is positive targeting of these payments (eg Estonia, Scotland), while some make the payments available to all sheep farms, including intensive indoor systems, where no positive environmental outcomes or public goods can be argued. Some countries are not applying coupled payments at all, so there is no level playing-field for sheep farming across the EU.

There are several good examples of Pillar 2 rural development measures supporting adequate management of semi-natural pastures within Natura 2000 (eg, in Bulgaria, Estonia, France and UK). Unfortunately, outwith the Natura 2000 network,

or in other countries (eg Spain), there is far less positive support, despite clear data held by the EC on the unfavourable condition of the majority of semi-natural grasslands.

In some member states, such as Sweden, agri-environment-climate measures are used to provide support for woody pastures that cannot be provided through Pillar 1 due to the ill-conceived eligibility restrictions. But in some other member states such as Spain, pastures that are not eligible for Pillar 1 are also excluded from Pillar 2 support.

Jabier Ruiz, EFNCPjabier@efncp.org

The European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism brings together ecologists, nature conservationists, farmers and policy makers. This non-profit network exists to increase understanding of the high nature conservation and cultural value of certain farming systems and to inform work on their maintenance.
www.efncp.org



Making the most of our natural capital

Often the two billion small-scale producers in the world, who collectively make a significant contribution to global food production, are overlooked in the constant drive to increase yields and feed a growing urban population writes Neil MacKintosh, son of former SCU chair John MacKintosh.

WHILST LARGE-SCALE farming is an important part of the answer in some areas of the world, we cannot feed the entire world without considerable help from small-scale production. When we also look at the ecosystem services gained from small-scale or extensive systems, we must conclude that they are a vital piece of the puzzle.

Lamb and beef production are an important feature of hill and upland systems. Beef and lamb production has come under close scrutiny recently, particularly in terms of greenhouse gas

emissions. In the hills and uplands, beef and lamb production produces readily-available, human-edible protein from human inedible plants, on areas of land not suitable for edible crop production.

These hill and upland areas also provide additional benefits referred to as ecosystem services. These additional benefits are often things like unique biodiversity and genetic resources, carbon storage, flood defence, pollution control and further reaching societal benefits. However, they often receive no recognition by the market. The recent release of the Natural Capital Protocol means such benefits are likely to become increasingly recognised and more highly valued by all.

The protocol is likely to further emphasise the need to consider the full range of benefits of different food production methods, which could allow many of the additional benefits of small-

scale production to be properly recognised in the future.

However, research continues to understand the importance of all scales of production and their value to future global food production.

Aberystwyth and Bangor Universities now run online MSc distance learning courses to help people understand the latest research in ruminant production systems. They are also always happy to discuss different aspects of their research with people who just want to expand their knowledge. If you would like to learn more contact the Advanced Training Partnership on 01970 823224.
www.atp-pasture.org.uk

Advanced Training Partnership
Sustainable and Efficient Food Production

Romania and Scotland: parallels from a Transylvanian journey



An account by David Findlay

AS THE FIRST trickle of light seeped into the sky and memories of a largely sleepless warm night faded into the shadows of Viscri, a Saxon village in Transylvania, Romania, I took a morning walk in the shade.

Only a handful of German-speaking Transylvanian Saxons now remain in the village, most having returned during and after the collapse of the Ceauşescu regime. At night a cacophony of noises – dogs barking, cats screeching, pigs wailing, cockerels crowing – conspired to keep me from sleep.

My cousin and I were on a week's expedition on horseback across the Transylvanian Outer Carpathians and the foothills of the Făgăraş Mountains. We crossed vast upland open meadows, much of it common land, smallholdings and ancient oak forests hiding brown bears, lynx and wild boar. We skirted round or passed through fortified towns, medieval castles and churches and gypsy villages, occasionally being overtaken by Romanian men racing against us with their horse and cart. The meadows and hayfields had a rich diversity of dazzling, scented wildflowers and butterflies.

Romania has a largely agricultural economy based mainly on privately-owned smallholdings (many less than two hectares), but with an increasing number of larger farming concerns. A substantial amount of common land is owned by town councils and the state, some of it grazed extensively but most grazed in discrete, hefted flocks. Up to 50% of all permanent common pasture land in Transylvania is community or state owned. The farming is probably best categorised as semi-subsistence. Few smallholders in Romania can afford a tractor.

Romania has been an EU member since 2007, with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and EU subsidies and grants making their influence felt. Although CAP incentives have increased the amount of land leased to private farmers, Pillars I and II (EU rural development policy) funding have also provided support, including agri-environmental schemes, for the development of local grazings associations. Like other EU member states, there has been a decline in the number of agricultural units but there are still a very large number – almost 3 million in 2010.

The population of Romania fell from almost 22 million in 2002 to less than 20 million today. Much of the younger rural population has been lured to the city lights, such as the bustling, wealthy city of Braşov in Transylvania which has been transformed since the fall of communism in the

Romanian revolution of 1989. Many more of the country's talented youth took advantage of free movement and have migrated since 2007 to Western Europe. Long before EU membership, the vast majority of Transylvanian Saxons – an ethnic group largely unknown in the west but with origins dating back to the 12th century – had returned to Germany and Austria. As with Scotland's Highlands and Islands, many rural areas are poor and suffer from depopulation, with more smallholdings and common land becoming neglected.

The parallels with Scotland are disturbing and point to demographic, economic and cultural shifts largely beyond the control of individual governments. In contrast to other EU member states, a very substantial though declining proportion of the active population – almost three-quarters – still works in the agricultural sector. Since the fall of communism in 1989, there has been a very rapid increase in the amount of land held in private ownership. Is the future one of private farming rather than communal working, in order to maximise subsidy payments? It is a little ironic that in Romania, one of the forces propelling change within the landholding sector is the EU (agricultural subsidy system, rural development and free movement), whilst in Scotland it is probable that the crofting and farming sectors will be exposed to the harsh realities of Brexit.

In Romania, the rise of private ownership has seen the formation of local grazing associations for sheep and cattle, on common land. These associations are relatively new institutions. Most of the common land consists of a mixture of lowland and upland meadows. The new associations could provide a more sustainable use of common land and resources, but like other such associations, they are sometimes beset by a lack of clear rules and regulations. Currently much of the common land is either neglected or used individually by private agreement (or forms part of the vast forests that swathe much of Transylvania), but grazing associations and the employment of full-time resident shepherds are on the rise.

The parallel with sheep stock clubs is close, although in the crofting counties many have been active for approximately a century. Many clubs continue to be successful and prove to be one of the most profitable and efficient uses of common grazing. As communal working of common grazing land is in decline, perhaps it is time not just to support existing sheep stock clubs, but to encourage new clubs to develop and diversify into other types of stock, where the grazing allows. In Romania, there appears to be huge potential for owners and tenants of common grazing land to

participate in agri-environmental schemes that can deliver both economic and environmental benefits.

One very distinctive feature of Transylvania is that almost all the upland pastures and smallholdings are unenclosed. There is little need to fence individual holdings, which are used for cropping, haymaking or are neglected.

Stock is grazed on the higher land, some as part of stock grazing associations and some as large private flocks. The flocks are guarded by shepherds, who live for the summer up on the pastures in tiny structures that resemble the airidh, or sheilings, that were commonplace throughout much of upland Scotland. The shepherds usually have a pack of noisy dogs, the native Carpathian shepherd dogs that keep watch and warn of predators. Active management and protection of the flock ensures that the brown bear, lynx and wolves lurking in the nearby forests have little opportunity to predate on stock.

Wolves have been protected in Romania since 2006 and now benefit from growing ecotourism. Our only encounter with a (very shy) bear was in the early morning in an oak forest. By contrast in Scotland, where a debate rages about the reintroduction of wild animals, much stock grazes extensively and is distantly managed, making it much more vulnerable to predation.

What was the enduring memory of my trip, other than fantastic riding, beautiful horses, great company and local rustic wines? It was a sense of the value of smallholdings and common land within a largely rural economy, even if some of that land is slowly becoming neglected whilst depopulation continues. It was a sense of the value of small-scale sustainable farming practices, combining private endeavour and communal working, which manage to keep people living on, and active on, the land whilst maintaining biodiverse ecosystems. There are real opportunities through EU support to develop sustainable forms of agriculture.

Over the coming decades, local food security, population retention and habitat protection are likely to become increasing pressures for Scotland's rural communities and the crofting counties. In such a context, we might consider crofting and common grazing land as a resource worth saving and nurturing.

Dr David Findlay is a former croft tenant. Educated at the Universities of Edinburgh and Aberdeen, he is accredited by the Law Society of Scotland as a specialist in crofting law. This article is written in a personal capacity and any views expressed are his own.

MEMBERS PAGES

Agricultural and country shows 2017

YOU MAY THINK that show time is still too far off, but time slips by very quickly, and 2017 will be here before you know it.

If you're involved in planning an agricultural show anywhere in the Highlands and Islands, please give us the details. Free publicity through *The Crofter* could help your show's public footfall. Or if you would like to have a stand as an SCF representative, we'll be pleased to loan the necessary equipment (within the SCF resources available) to put on a good display. Let us know when your show will take place, if it's not shown below.

We're particularly interested in the small local shows which many members attend and enjoy. Our visibility at shows is very important but does rely on our local members.

Please inform HQ of any shows not shown, or your willingness to man a stand at any of those listed. More show news next issue.



Cheviot sheep judging at the Dunvegan Show

What we know so far:

22-25 June	Royal Highland Show, Ingliston
21 July	Tiree Show
22 July	Sutherland Show, Dornoch
TBC – previously late July	Dunvegan Show, Isle of Skye
2-3 August	Black Isle Show, Muir of Ord
2 August	Arran Show, Lamlash, Isle of Arran,
4 August	Kintyre Agricultural Show, Campbeltown
9 August	Bute Agricultural Show, Isle of Bute
10 August	Grantown Show, Grantown-on-Spey
10 August	Islay Show, Bridgend, Islay
12 August	Orkney County Show, Kirkwall, Orkney
12 August	Mid-Argyll Show, Kilmory, Lochgilphead
26 August	Lochaber Show, Torlundy
TBC – August	Lairg Crofters Show, Lairg
TBC – previously mid August	Skye Agricultural Show, Portree

How to increase SCF membership

THE SCF BOARD and Council meeting will take place on the morning of 16 December in Inverness. In the afternoon we will hold a workshop to gather views on the current status of SCF in meeting its strategic objectives of:

1. increasing net membership numbers;
2. representing members and crofting;
3. implementing development projects such as crofting skills training;
4. sourcing alternative funding;
5. leveraging capacity through volunteer time and partnerships;

and to plan what actions will improve the achieving of these objectives.

Our number one objective is to increase our membership through retaining existing members and recruiting new members. As you will appreciate a representative organisation is fuelled by its membership. We need you and we need more of you!

If you have any ideas on this please let us know.



MEMBERS PAGES

Donna's Kilimanjaro adventure

SCF'S TRAINING administrator Donna and her husband Dave set off in September to attempt to reach the summit of Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain and the highest freestanding mountain in the world.

Donna said, "Dave saw Kilimanjaro in the distance when he was in Tanzania on safari nearly 20 years ago. He's talked about how much he'd like to get to the top one day, so this year we thought it was time." It was an adventure Donna had always told him he'd be undertaking alone. "I'm still not quite sure what came over me," she said, "but in a life-is-too-short moment I decided to go with him and to make it a fundraising opportunity for

two charities, MS Research and Aberlour Child Care Trust."

The group they joined took seven days to complete the trip – allowing time to acclimatise to the altitude. Kilimanjaro is 5895m (19341 ft), 4.4 times the height of Ben Nevis. Sadly Donna succumbed to altitude sickness on the mountain, reaching 4400m over three days before having to turn back. After two days of increasingly severe headaches and vomiting, the group's doctor had to put her on a drip, then next morning she made the seven-hour hike back down the mountain with a guide and porter to look after her. The couple had made a pact before leaving that if one of them had to turn back, but was still standing, the other

one would carry on.

It took some persuading but Dave did carry on with the rest of the group. Two days later he started the final ascent at midnight, reaching the summit at sunrise. After two more days of hiking for Dave, they were reunited at Mweka Gate, where all the porters and guides gave the group a celebration with singing, dancing and food. "The whole thing was the most incredible adventure. Even with all the drama and illness it was an experience I'll never forget," said Donna.

The initial target was £8,200. So far they've raised £9,611 and counting. Donations can still be made at www.justgiving.com/teams/DonnaDaveKilimanjaro.



Good reasons to support the Scottish Crofting Federation

SCF MEMBERS get:

- access to a free dedicated legal helpline through crofting law specialists Inksters Solicitors;
- the opportunity to brand and market croft produce with our unique Scottish Crofting Produce Mark – giving you the added credibility of being a member of the UK's largest association of small-scale food producers;
- to promote your croft tourism business on the SCF website, with over 55,000 page views a year;
- a 5% discount on purchases (excluding feed and medicines) from Animal Health (Highland) Ltd, Dingwall;
- three issues a year of *The Crofter* and regular e-mail notifications from SCF HQ of policy, information and news;
- free host membership of the WWOOF croft volunteers scheme for a year;
- to be a part of a wide network of contacts for sharing experiences and sourcing

information;

- access to our skills mentoring and community mediation services;
- access to advice and contact with someone who can help solve problems;
- access to the services of the NFU Mutual Insurance Society, whose schemes have been specially drawn up to cover crofting homes and activities;
- the opportunity to receive a regular e-newsletter update of our register of available crofts, listing available owner/occupier and tenant crofts throughout the crofting counties;
- assistance and guidance for those wanting to enter crofting.

Plus, you have the unique opportunity to help shape crofting policies for the benefit of future generations of crofters and our rural communities.

The Scottish Crofting Federation is the only organisation lobbying exclusively for the interests of crofters and small producers. Your membership

fee is a vital part of the funding that allows us to do this.

With our collective action, support for crofting and remote rural communities gains a higher profile. Thanks to our members the SCF gives crofting a strong political representation, benefiting crofters now as well as future generations: we are directly involved in shaping policies and enhanced schemes specific to crofting such as the Croft House Grant Scheme, Bull Hire Scheme, and Crofting Counties Agricultural Grants Scheme; and the beneficial parts of the Crofting Reform Bill have been retained while the many negative aspects have been removed.

For all this and more the annual subscription is only £63 per individual or £94.50 for joint membership (two people at the same address). Visit www.crofting.org/join_scf to join online, or get in touch with SCF HQ.



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SCF Annual Gathering 2017

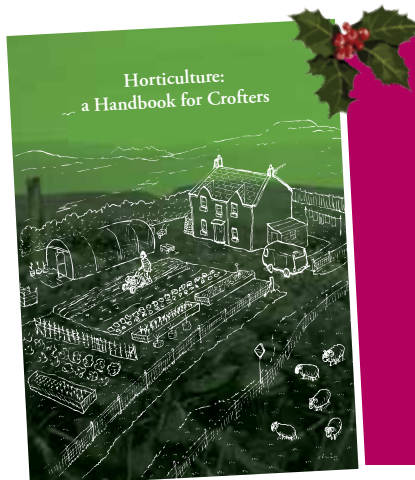
WE WILL BE holding our annual gathering next year on 10 and 11 March 2017 (lunchtime to lunchtime) in Applecross, Wester Ross. The theme is Scotland's Place in Europe. We will have key theme speakers including cabinet secretaries of the Scottish Government and European partners.

If you able to come, you are of course very welcome to stay for as long as you wish. We realise that it is not the easiest place to get to so you may perhaps be able to tarry a while to enjoy this beautiful, remote place.

We look forward very much to welcoming you to Applecross. More details will be published in the next edition of *The Crofter*.



The ideal Christmas present



Horticulture: a Handbook for Crofters

Lots of useful information for new and experienced growers in the crofting areas. Beautifully illustrated, the book comes in a convenient loose-leaf style in a ring binder with space for you to add your own pages of notes, cropping plans etc.

Available to SCF members for £10 and non-members for £15, plus postage if necessary.

Please contact SCF HQ to order your copy.

STAY UP TO DATE

Have you received your SCF e-newsletter recently? If not, please email hq@crofting.org with i-croft as the subject

Change of staff



Sandra Lindsay

KATRINE FOGT, whom many of you will know as the voice of SCF on the end of the phone, is leaving us for a period to have her first child. All good wishes to her in this joyous endeavour.

Sandra Lindsay will be covering for her and we wish to welcome her and look forward to working with her.

Sandra introduces herself below.

I live in Letterfearn, on the shores of Loch Duich, and have lived here for 18 years since moving from Glasgow.

I have worked mostly in research and learning environments and I'm really looking forward to working for the Crofting Federation. I have two daughters, one at University and one working with her dad in plumbing. My daughter has recently become a tenant of a croft and I am particularly interested in the opportunities for young people to get involved in crofting and creating sustainable rural communities.

I love being in the hills and am a member of the Skye and Lochalsh hillwalking club. I have just recently taken part in the excellent "Access to Crofting Toolkit" course and plan to put all that wealth of information to good use.



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visit www.crofting.org
for full contact details

Company Number SC 218658 Charity Number SC 031919

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The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the SCF.



Scottish Crofting Produce
Highlands and Islands Croft Origin
Tòraidh Croftaichearachd na h-Alba
As a Croft area a Highland Croft is not a Highland