

## Conflict between two endangered species: crofters and geese



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**T**HE UISTS HAVE had a problem with wild geese damaging crops and grazings for many years now.

The main culprit was the greylag but this is now being overtaken by the Greenland barnacle goose. The greylags were fairly well controlled in an adaptive management pilot scheme run by SNH but, despite its success, the scheme has closed. Was this a good investment of £294,858 public money? Yes, if you look at the success; no, if the scheme does not continue and the greylag

population returns to its former numbers.

The barnacle population in Uist is escalating. Last year it was 4,000, this year 8,000, next year? It has been predicted that if they are not controlled now, crofting will stop within 10 years. The repercussions will last for generations, with some of Europe's finest high nature value farmland, the esteemed machair habitat, being left to degenerate. As SCF chair Russell Smith said recently, "We have a conflict between two endangered species – barnacle geese and

crofters on the machair. And the geese seem to be winning."

SCF has been fighting for the control of wild geese on croft land for many years, with a petition in the Scottish Parliament urging the government to not cut the budget, and the goose issue being regularly brought to the Cross Party Group on Crofting. This parliamentary group recently wrote to cabinet secretary for environment Roseanna

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## Scottish upland sheep support shenanigans

**T**HE SCOTTISH UPLAND Sheep Support Scheme is a very significant support mechanism for crofters, introduced as a chance for those on Region Three rough grazing to make up for their distressingly low basic payments, but the obscure criteria and fear of reprisals has put off many who deserve the payment from claiming it.

The recent mixed messages from Scottish Government over claiming and tagging dates has done nothing to help this; and has only emphasised the fact that we need to revamp this essential scheme with the potential to pay the

differential needed for those crofting our marginal areas.

The scheme has been very lucrative for some though, as the SCF highlighted recently, due to the lack of capping.

Some large producers have been claiming not only on their replacements but on any number of ewe hogs, the surplus then being sold off. This rapidly uses up the limited budget, depriving others of benefiting from it. This was not the intention of the scheme; and it is appropriate that even NFUS has recognised this and is proposing a limit on claims of 20-25% of the breeding flock – roughly equivalent

to actual replacements.

However, the objective could be achieved most effectively by paying on ewe hogs retained as breeding replacements or on gimmers taken into the breeding flock. This would allow for maintaining flock numbers in regular ages, or for growing the flock size. But cynics may say that the Scottish Government is unlikely to take such a bold step which could require more administration.

Paying on a percentage is a step in the right direction at least and should be relatively easy to accommodate.

However, the payment should

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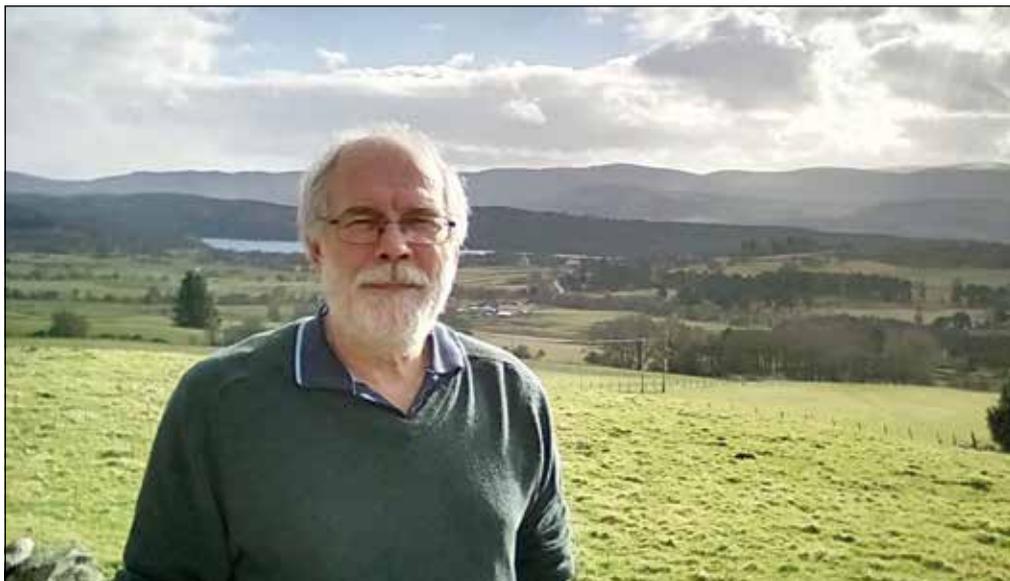
### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

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- Crofting on St Kilda
- Good food
- Help when you need it

...and much more

## Message from the chair...

Russell Smith



**S**OW MANY replacement stock lambs did you keep this autumn?

Are you an optimist and kept lots because you think that by the time you sell their offspring in August 2019 we will have continuing tariff-free access to the EU plus lots of good trade deals with other countries to boost exports? Or are you a pessimist and cut the numbers you kept since you think we will be have lost our EU export market due to high tariffs and have accepted a higher quota of imported New Zealand lamb. Or are you a realist who hasn't a clue what is going on and so have just kept the same

number as normal whilst hoping that someone somewhere has a plan for the Brexit negotiations?

Uncertainty over the next few years along with falling prices for old ewes and (at best) stagnant lamb prices has kept down good cheer at Lairg and, no doubt, other marts round the country. Not much there to attract the dynamic young people that we need to take crofting forward.

The opportunity with Brexit is that we can have a support system designed in Scotland for Scotland which might mean that crofting is built in from the start and not added as an afterthought to something

designed to suit the industrial agriculture lobby. Common grazings suffer particularly badly from this tendency and that contributes to the declining use of grazings and the waste of a valuable resource.

That is one of the things that we have pushed for in the SCF position paper on Brexit that has recently been issued to politicians of all parties in Westminster and Holyrood. We will keep campaigning on this.

Elsewhere, the crofting law reform consultation moves round the country. The team are certainly energetic in covering the crofting counties. I hope that they are not

confusing activity with progress and that we see some results soon.

There is a long list of known failings of the law (The Sump) and it seems obvious to me that we need to get on and correct these so that crofting law works for crofters rather than for lawyers. There is something wrong if an intelligent layperson can't pick up one document and understand what the law is.

On the positive side, the Scottish Government started paying out loans for basic payments in October, which will relieve the pressure for many of us and get money flowing round from crofters to suppliers and local businesses, to the benefit of all. Whilst they are billed as loans they are really just advance payments. I hope you applied for them, as we advised members.

Research by the James Hutton Institute suggests that, on average, the move from single farm payments to basic payments has benefitted the crofting counties.

Also there is good news on the Crofting Commission who seem to be working together and getting on with the job of regulating **our** system which they do on **our** behalf. We are working with them (and HIE) to get more vacant, absentee and derelict crofts back into use to the benefit of both crofting townships and the wider communities – more people, more activity, more progress.

We remain *the only organisation solely dedicated to campaigning for crofters and fighting for the future of crofting.*

## Scottish upland sheep support shenanigans

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be on 30% of breeding flock, on the basis that those on Region Three land will likely have more losses, especially due to predation. 20% would do if you were taking six crops of lambs as lowland farmers might; but most crofters would work to a four or five crop system. To facilitate those with small numbers or building up their flocks, such as new entrants, for those claiming 50 or fewer hogs the percentage criteria should not apply.

There are more issues and the scheme clearly needs to be overhauled. It would be appropriate for government officials to meet with crofters and other upland sheep producers to discuss practicalities and the way forward.



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# Brexit: brave new world or bananas new world?

## Free trade fanatics and future for crofting agriculture

*Like many, writes SCF director Brendan O'Hanrahan in this personal commentary, I have been transfixed by the often-bewildering and sometimes horrifying news and analysis associated with our continuing Brexit thriller and the possibly glorious future that awaits us on the other side of the divorce.*

**T**HERE HAS RECENTLY been no shortage of projections for the agriculture industry, with a multiplicity of scenarios advanced, advocated and analysed with varying degrees of rigour. Trying to digest all these predictions, I come to both scare you and point to some sunny patches in the uplands.

Even at this late stage in negotiations there is a worrying combination of incompetence, insouciant apparent delight at 'no deal' or similar cliff-edge outcomes; and salivating at the prospects of a promised free trade utopia, demonstrated by a sizeable cohort of the UK Government – including the likes of Boris Johnson, Liam Fox and, at times, even the DEFRA secretary, Michael Gove. These reckless visions are being fed by a swathe of right-wing think tanks populated by cavalier economists such as Patrick Minford and Tim Congdon. We've seen these in reports from Economists for Free Trade (the *Who's afraid of Free Trade* report) and even the supposedly more sober and centre-right Policy Exchange, which recently brought out a report called *Farming Tomorrow* (which I do recommend people read).

Now, it's not necessarily that the economics and analysis in these reports is wrong, it's more that they demonstrate a willingness to jeopardise, even potentially destroy,



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whole sectors of the already historically-weakened British industrial economy – with agriculture at the top of the vulnerable list.

The common theme and priority with these scenarios is to deliver a better deal for consumers, and counteract the inflationary trends unleashed since the referendum, which of course makes sense in terms of the populist drive behind Brexit. As far as these seers and sages are concerned, opening the free trade floodgates to waves of chlorinated chicken, hormone-fed beef and dirt-cheap lamb from the US, Brazil and the Antipodes will reward Brexit voters and, at the same time, force the weaker sectors of the agricultural industry to shape up or ship out. For them it is purely the price aspect and market efficiencies which are regarded as priorities – only lip service is paid to other factors which British consumers have hitherto valued highly.

This approach is very market-driven. Phrases from even the *Farming Tomorrow* report such

as "more specialised and capable of competing in global markets"; "Seeking self-sufficiency in food should not be a goal of agricultural policy," illustrate how the strengths (admittedly not yet sufficiently realised) of the products from crofting areas and similar systems in other parts of upland Britain – currently enjoyed by much of the supermarket-shopping public – would be jettisoned, and such crofters and farmers would be reduced to mere custodians of ecosystems and pretty landscapes. That's the ghetto they envisage for the vast majority of upland agriculture in the UK. And they scoff at any notion that food security may be an important national objective in these unsettled geopolitical times.

There is of course a strong argument that crofters should be paid more for managing and safeguarding some of the most sensitive habitats and species in Europe – but even though these scenarios do envisage substantial rises in Pillar II payments (agri-environment), they propose almost

scrapping direct support entirely. And our current Pillar II schemes do a very bad job of reaching crofters. Before this would be acceptable there would have to be a radical redesign of these systems, incorporating a substantial element of bottom-up or locally-led input for each area.

The more detailed agronomists' Brexit scenarios showed that sheep prices are predicted to collapse and beef prices to fall significantly under unilateral trade liberalisation – offsetting any potential gains from more generous agri-environment and LFASS-type payments.

So, what do we need to fight for? The longer the transition period, the better – it's as simple as that.

And the future? A radical focus on increasing the added value derived from crofting produce (especially meat) has to be the way to a secure future. This will involve more abattoirs and intelligent, precisely-targeted marketing of our high value products.

It is the way forward, but we will need time to realise it.

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Cunningham, raising concerns about escalating numbers of wild geese in Uist and asking what the Scottish Government intends to do to control them.

A point raised by the group was the difference in spend on controlling geese in Islay – predominantly arable farmers – and the Uists – predominantly crofters. Ms Cunningham replied that the greater spending on Islay compared to the Western Isles does not reflect the value attached to farming or crofting on these islands, but rather the greater

constraints on management options on Islay as it has around 70% of the total barnacle population overwintering on the island.

Scottish Government spends around £1.3 million per year on the control of wild geese. Just over £900,000 is spent per year on Islay to protect farmers' land and pay compensation for damage. In contrast Scottish Government has spent an average of under £40,000 per year in Uist over the life of the pilot scheme. The budget for this year was zero.

Islay has a population of around 50,000 barnacles at the last count, Uist about 8,000 or 16%. So if there is a spend of £900,000 to control the Islay population, proportionately Uist should be receiving £144,000 per year.

This year Scottish Government put in nothing towards goose management intervention in Uist, though they have put up £10,000 to cover all of the pilot areas of Orkney, Uist, Tiree, Coll, Lewis and Harris to promote do-it-yourself goose control. Uist crofters are justifiably at their wits' end.



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## Crofting law reform continuing

**T**HE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S commitment to continue the process of reforming crofting legislation within this parliamentary session proceeded with a 12-week-long consultation, coming to a close as you read this.

The crofting bill team ran a series of public meetings to explain the options they are suggesting. Hopefully you got to one and were able to respond to the consultation. The SCF response can be found on our website.

This is another stage in the long process of attempting to make crofting law fit for purpose now and for the future. Over the years since legislation was formed in 1886, amendments have introduced inconsistencies and errors, rendering current crofting law difficult to access and, in some aspects, unusable. The current reform process started with the formation of the Land Reform Policy Group in 1998, which led to the first crofting reform act of 2007, a bit of a damp squib that did not fulfil its promise. However, this resulted in the Committee of Inquiry on Crofting, the largest investigation into crofting for a generation.

Only some of the recommendations of the inquiry were taken up by Scottish Government, who then passed the next crofting act in 2010. Following its enactment some glitches emerged, necessitating the passing of an emergency act in 2013 to amend the 2010 act, and leading to

well over 100 problem issues being placed in the Crofting Law Sump by stakeholders, lawyers and members of the crofting public. If nothing else, the sump has shown that there is a lot needing to be done to make crofting law fit for purpose.

The consultation suggests a range of options for taking reform forward. The option of merely consolidating the acts with little change would be a pointless exercise. The option of starting all over again with a clean sheet runs the risk of crofters' rights being lost, bearing in mind that a clean sheet means exactly that. Finding consensus on what goes on to the clean sheet would also be protracted, if not impossible, to achieve. The two options of 1: amending and then consolidating the law or 2: restating law are practicable – though it is difficult to anticipate what could be left out in restating law, the consultation document indicating that it would be the lighter version of the two. The final option of 'other' would include doing nothing or terminating crofting legislation.

Whilst exploring ways to make the legislation fit for purpose, we must not lose sight of the fact that crofting legislation was formed to protect crofters' rights. The crofting act is at the heart of crofting and has evolved over 130 years, adapting to work for crofting in a changing world. This is another time of change and the basic principle of protection must not be lost in the wash.

## Crofting law consultation

*Martin Minton from Inksters Solicitors looks at the scope of the consultation, which closed for input on 20th November.*

**T**HE 2017 CROFTING law consultation seeks the views of those with a stake in crofting and its future.

The consultation takes a broad view on crofting today, and why changes are needed to the law that governs it. The consultation document references the Scottish Government's commitment to securing the future of crofting and its contribution to the economy (estimated to be £85.8 million in 2016).

However, recent legislative reform, rather than simplifying crofting law, has arguably made dealing with it increasingly problematic. The practical difficulties in working with the current legal framework will be known only too well to crofters and those who work in crofting law. It is clear reform is needed, but what form should that take?

Central to the consultation is the proposal of four options.

**Option 1** is the consolidation of all the legislation (currently found in the Crofters (Scotland) Act 1993, as amended by the Crofting Reform etc Act 2007, the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 and the Crofting (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2013). A single act would be created. However, there would be no scope for any substantive changes or additions to the law and the many and varied issues identified in the Crofting Law Sump could not be addressed. The simplest option, but perhaps not a longer term solution?

**Option 2** would see a two-stage approach; existing law would be amended, followed then by consolidation. This would allow issues to be addressed; but the second stage would likely need to wait till the next parliamentary period.

**Option 3** would involve a process of amending existing legislation, bringing some substantive changes to the law while restating some of the existing law. This would attempt to reduce layers of legislation and may be quicker than option 2, but with less opportunity to make significant reforms.

**Option 4** is perhaps the most controversial – and most difficult to achieve. A clean sheet; starting from scratch and developing entirely new law to fit with the needs of crofting today. Whether consensus could be reached as to what that should be may be the biggest barrier to taking this route.

The consultation looks to ascertain specific legislative priorities among topics such as absenteeism, succession and the lack of clarity surrounding owner-occupier crofter status (the current legislative loophole at Section 19B of the 2010 Act means some owner-occupiers do not have owner-occupier crofter status.)

Hopefully, a wide range of responses will enable the Scottish Government to move forward with crofting law reform that will work for crofters.



The Women In Agriculture Task Force, on which Patrick Krause represents SCF

# Women in agriculture

**T**HE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT responded to the *Women in Farming and the Agricultural Sector Research Report* published in June by the formation of a task force, co-chaired by Fergus Ewing, cabinet secretary for the rural economy and connectivity, and Joyce Campbell, a working farmer and entrepreneur based in north Sutherland, with members from a wide range of organisations including SCF.

Crofting and SCF come out well in the research as having women involved in all levels of activity but the agriculture sector as a whole has deeply-ingrained gender biases. The task force will be looking at ways to counter these and encourage positive action such as the provision of appropriate training, gender-balanced governance and action to promote inclusion and equality.

First minister Nicola Sturgeon said on launching the report "The Scottish Government-

commissioned *Women in Farming and Agriculture Research Report* draws out some difficult issues as well as looking at some of the slightly less controversial issues facing women within Scottish agriculture. If we are to achieve change we must be prepared to face up to and discuss and debate and challenge those difficult issues."

SCF welcomes members' views on this topic. Any thoughts, examples and advice on action that SCF can take should be sent to Sandra in HQ.

## Armchair environmentalists versus local development



Coul Links looking north from the proposed 14th tee, with Coul Steading in the distance left centre

*SCF member Jim McGillivray poses a pertinent question.*

**SPEND EVERY** Saturday morning serving in the volunteer-run Embo Community Shop.

A high number of the Embo diaspora return from around the world to find their roots, and they end up at some point in our little shop. Thanks to the internet, they come equipped with their family trees – Rosses, Mackays, Frasers and Cummings – and they are directed to the houses where their forebears lived.

Like many Highland villages, Embo has been subject to generations of poverty, neglect and emigration. Beautiful though our area is, people

cannot make a living out of scenery alone, and every year our young people leave to find education and work in the south. With less proper work available in the south, and university education becoming more expensive, even that becomes more problematic.

There is something of a solution emerging. Todd Warnock and Mike Keiser, American millionaires and golf fanatics, are seeking planning permission from Highland Council to construct and operate an international-standard golf course on Coul Links, just to the north of the village, at a cost of around \$10 million. It's something they have done very successfully in other countries.

Between the construction and operational phases there will be a significant number of jobs in an area of extremely dire economic circumstance.

Coul Links has an interesting history. It was industrial in its time with the Dornoch-Mound railway line running through it. It was agricultural, with Cambusmore Estate wintering 100 cattle there, the beasts trampling the place flat in the process. It provided provenance for the village in hard times from rabbit, roe, hare, mallard, teal and widgeon. And before computer games, it provided entertainment for the village bairns who experimented with their scramblers up and down the dunes; and every year in the season set fire to the place.

The area is currently becoming extensively overgrown with invasive species – gorse, bracken and willow herb. Yet suddenly it has become an extremely cherished ecological habitat. Environmental bodies and armchair environmentalists queue up to condemn the golf course proposal, without offering any alternative investment, without admitting the radical and expensive measures the developers have taken to accommodate all environmental issues raised, and without admitting the improvements to environment, biodiversity and economy that the investment will create.

Is it a regrettable story throughout the Highlands that those of an environmental persuasion, secure in salary, pension, property and personal wealth, seek to deprive those who are less fortunate in all of these characteristics from having some modest advancement made available to them?

If you believe so, then please comment accordingly, reference 17/04601/FULSU, to the Highland Council Principal Planner.



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- Completion of Assignations, Decrofting and Sublet applications
- GPS croft maps for Crofting Commission or SGRPID
- Operational Needs Assessment to support planning applications
- Livestock record keeping and pre-inspection checks
- Grassland and crop advice including soil analysis, fertiliser and reseeds
- Livestock feed analysis, rationing and animal health planning
- Horticultural advice
- Agri-environment advice
- Forestry scheme implementation and management
- Diversification opportunities
- Marketing advice
- Renewable energy feasibility studies including wood fuel heating systems

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## TRAINING

# Training to diversify



SCF training manager Lucy Beattie outlines the importance and potential of diversification.

**C**ROFTING IS ROOTED in a diverse range of enterprises. Here at SCF training we have seen a few.

A crofter in Elphin who spins rare-breed sheep wool, Angora goat wool and collie-dog hair to make wall hangings; micro-businesses such as croft-gate honesty boxes; macro-businesses such as the Isle of Harris Gin Company. There is much to be proud of and a strong appetite for learning more ways to diversify and expand your business.

SCF training has been fortunate to secure funding from the Princes Countryside Fund to support diversification events and in October we saw two charcuterie courses in Mull and Strontian. These one-day events were greatly supported at a local level by Claire Pepper, local course director, Eve Coles (Mull Abbatoir) and Hollie Taylor (Ardnamurchan) who supplied home-reared pigs to be used in the courses.

Tutor Rachel Hammond said: "It was a nose-to-tail pleasure tutoring the course! What lovely people! It reminded me of why I make charcuterie, and was a learning process for me as well as a joy."

Rachael shares this recipe:

**Chorizo fresco**  
– a Mexican breakfast sausage

Have it with eggs, in a burrito or with tacos.

1kg good fatty pork mince (almost frozen) about 20% fat  
1 tbsp salt  
4 tsp smoked paprika  
2 tsp chipotle (freshly roasted and ground, remove the seeds for a cooler sausage)  
1 tbsp acho chilli (freshly roasted and ground)  
2 tsp minced garlic  
1 tsp freshly-ground black pepper  
3 tsp chopped fresh oregano (can use dried, but it's not very jolly)  
1 tsp cumin (freshly roasted and ground)  
1 tbsp tequila, chilled (to make this taste smokey, infuse to taste with some lapsang souchong tea, strained before use)  
1 1/2 tsp cider vinegar, chilled

Mix everything in a mixer (too cold to do by hand), the colder the mixture the better the texture, until nicely sticky-looking. Fill your pork casings, rest overnight in the fridge, twist into links and fry gently.

## Top tips on diversification

**S**CF RUNS A number of demanded courses throughout the year. If there's something you'd like to do please get in touch. We also work closely with Business Gateway (BG), who run a number of business start-up and support training events each year. Here are some top tips for success when starting a diversified enterprise on your croft, from BG's managers David Knight (Sutherland/Ross Shire) and Alistair Danter (Skye and Lochalsh).

### 1. Prepare a business plan

Initially, this can be in any form that suits you. Keep it flexible and add/amend/delete as your research progresses. It can be easily modified to suit a funder's requirements, but remember, the business plan is primarily your guide to how you're going to achieve your goals in both the short and longer term.

### 2. Cashflow is king

No matter how altruistic your aims, the business needs more money coming in than going out. The cashflow forecast is probably your most useful indicator – keep updating it.

### 3. Research

The biggest cause of any stress is uncertainty. And uncertainty is caused by a lack of information. Do your research and get the information.

### 4. The "rolling why?"

Why are you starting the business? Why are your competitors failing/succeeding? Why do you have no money in the bank? Why do you hate/love your business? Why are your customers complaining? When you come up with an initial answer, ask why again. And again. Until you get the true answer.

### 5. Remember the three Ds:

Diversification in the face of desperation will be a disaster. Sometimes it is just not worth it and you should not go down that route.

### 6. Grow your assets and strengths

– rather than saying this is what I need.

### 7. Humans are a crop

They need nurturing, but treat 'em right and they are more value than sheep, coos, grass, fruit, veg, etc

### 8. Network

Meet people. Talk to people. Keep records of the people you meet. Some of those people will be useful to you and your business one day. And you'll be useful to them.

### 9. Get advice

Start with Business Gateway and we can hopefully identify the most appropriate support for developing your business.



**SCF training has been shortlisted for the Scottish Rural awards. Results will be known in March.**

## ACCESS TO LAND

**I**N THIS ISSUE we look at what can be achieved when unused croft land is freed up for those who will work it.

This is one of the key goals from the various stakeholder group discussions on the future of crofting and the recent consultation on crofting law reform. It is a concern that has been voiced for many years and was highlighted in the Shucksmith report.

Crofting will never prosper when underutilised ground abounds yet keen would-be crofters cannot get a hold of land. Rod MacKenzie, Crofting Commission chair, looks at how crofts can be made available; and we have a number of articles on the remarkable achievements that members have made when they get their hands on a croft.

We look at croft development, diversification and the results of hard work and innovation.

If you or someone you know is struggling to keep going, finding it tough to maintain your croft, you'll see in this issue that help is available. We can open up possibilities for someone with new energy and commitment. We can give them guidance if they need it. Follow the advice in Rod's article and be inspired by the achievements of our writers in the feature.



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## Demand for land



© Martin Benson – Rodal, Harris

**A** KEY DRIVER of land reform in Scotland has been to increase the number of people who occupy, own, manage and have a say in Scotland's land.

A broad-ranging review by the Land Reform Policy Group, carried out in the late 1990s, found that it is essential to achieve a reduction in the concentration of ownership and management arrangements, at local level, to promote sustainable development in Scotland. Furthermore, the Land Reform Review Group Report of 2014 emphasises the need to increase access to land by addressing the fact that 432 private land owners own 50% of the private rural land in Scotland. In short, we need more people living on, using, owning and managing Scotland's rural land.

In our contribution to the land reform

deliberations, SCF has called on the Scottish Government to create 10,000 new crofts, half of which should be woodland crofts. In discussion, two objections are sometimes raised to this aspiration. The first is "Why 10,000? Why such a big number? Why not start with something small, a few hundred perhaps?"

The answer to this objection is that we are talking about only a tiny proportion of Scotland's rural land. If we use 5 ha as an average croft size (according to the Crofting Commission), 10,000 new crofts would be 50,000 ha (25,000 ha agro-crofts and 25,000 ha woodland crofts).

The total amount of agricultural land in Scotland which is not already under crofting tenure is 4.94 million ha so 25,000 ha of new crofts would only take **0.5%** of this land. The total woodland area over the whole of Scotland is 1.44 million ha so

25,000 ha represents only **1.7%** of that. And the bottom line is that we get 10,000 more crofting families on the land.

The second objection is, "Why create new crofts when there are existing crofts that are unused but not released?" This is indeed an issue that needs to be addressed but it will take time, so creating new crofts in parallel to bringing existing crofts back into use makes sense.

One of the functions of the Crofting Commission is, as a guardian of croft land, to ensure that croft land is put to good use and is not neglected. It can do this by facilitating successful relets, getting more crofts into active use. The convener of the Crofting Commission has outlined some options that can be taken with unworked crofts in his article in this issue of *The Crofter*. SCF is looking at ways to start a development project that will work in accord with the Commission's initiatives. The plan is to bring existing crofters who are not using their crofts together with young people who are wanting to croft. We aim to run a pilot in the Outer Hebrides.

Something we have also considered is the creation of a land trust to facilitate the creation of new crofts and the management of assigning unused crofts, to ensure that the land is protected and remains for public good, something along the lines of how community estates manage their land.

This last point could provide a connection with an initiative presented at a Scottish Parliament event recently – "Wanted: Land for New Farmers". This saw the establishment of the Scottish Farm Land Trust, an organisation which aims to emulate the very successful initiatives happening in other countries such as France. The SFLT recently carried out a survey asking if people are interested in starting to farm. They had 1,286 positive responses, 989 of whom want to farm agro-ecologically and 73% of these wanting less than 20ha. A fear of insecurity of tenure was cited by 56% of respondents as a barrier to entering farming.

You can see the dots joining up – crofting is the answer.

## ACCESS TO LAND

# Unworked crofts

*Crofting Commission convener Rod MacKenzie looks at this vital issue.*

**T**HE CROFTING COMMISSION was delighted earlier this year to have let the tenancies of six vacant crofts to new entrants.

We are continuing to work with landlords on unresolved succession cases, to bring more crofts back into use.

Avoiding an unresolved succession – where there is no will confirming the crofter's wishes in relation to who they would like the croft passed on to – is so important, as it means the croft can be passed on easily to the next crofter rather than potentially lie empty for a significant amount of time.

We are increasingly being asked about crofts that are underused or not used at all, even when

the crofter is resident.

This would fall under non-compliance of duties. However, it is sometimes the result of a sensitive situation and difficult for the Commission to take steps to resolve it, for example when the crofter is possibly an elderly person or someone in ill health who is unable to utilise the croft land.

There are positive steps crofters can take themselves to make sure the land is kept in good repair until such time as they are able to work it again.

## Options for crofters

Subletting, or if you are an owner-occupier crofter a short-term let, allows you to let someone else use the land for a specific period of time. It is up to the crofter to decide who they want to use the croft for that period of time and crofters should remember that the sublet/short term let is NOT

a permanent transfer of the croft and they would remain the principal tenant or owner-occupier crofter.

If a crofter is thinking about transferring the croft to someone else on a permanent basis, but does not feel sure about it, then a sublet/short term let could also be a way of letting someone use the croft to see if they will make good use of the land before deciding whether to assign/let it to them.

We know that another key concern is what happens to the house if a crofter decides to pass the croft on. When assigning, a crofter can keep the house and continue living in the area, as long as they apply to the Commission to decroft the house site and then purchase it from their landlord. Similarly an owner-occupier crofter can let the croft tenancy but exclude the house site and garden ground area from the let.

You will find information on the Commission website, or you can give us a call and we can talk you through the options available.

[www.crofting.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.crofting.scotland.gov.uk)

# A privilege to call ourselves crofters

*My family and I are first-generation crofters, write Mairi and Jonathan Hedges.*

**W**E ARE ABLE to make this proud statement because of one man, Alistair Maciver (see page 10).

We first met Alistair when we were looking at a croft in Rogart. When that fell through he asked us to his house. Following an excellent tea, and an informal chat/interview, he drove us up the road and offered us the tenancy of the croft on which we have lived for the last ten years and now call home.

After an often frustrating time on the west coast – where many crofts were derelict, townships full of holiday homes, young people moving away and croft tenancies almost impossible to get – this seemed like a miracle.

That Alistair wanted us to take on the land that he and his family had worked was a huge act of trust on his part, made the more poignant for us as we had been knowledgeable informed in the west that “you wouldn't understand crofting”.

Crofting is our everyday life. Whilst we will always be incomers, we are custodians of a 25-acre piece of Sutherland, carrying a tradition into the future. Things move slowly on a bare-land croft, and after ten years in a caravan, we are almost ready to move into our house. We have done what we can, mostly by hand. The ditches



Jonathan and Mairi's croft in Inchcape, Sutherland

have been re-dug, weeds tackled and topped, fences repaired. We are slowly gathering equipment, and what we have is also used for contracting outside the croft, so it pays its way.

We have a small flock of Cheviot-cross sheep, started with 10 ewe hogs, and now we have 35 home-bred ewes. The sheep have been a steep learning curve, but suit us

and the ground, and we cannot now imagine life without them.

We have planted a lot of trees, without grants so we are able to graze the sheep between them. Sheep and trees are tricky, but can be done. We have many plans for the future. Day to day there is nowhere we would rather be.

Alistair changed our lives by assigning us the croft. Crofts should

be lived on and worked, knowledge and skills passed on rather than forgotten; in this way previous generations can be remembered no matter whether they are a blood relation or not. Crofting is such an important and unique social land use.

It is a privilege to be able to call ourselves crofters.

## ACCESS TO LAND

# New crofts in Argyll point to the future

*Michael Eyre, forest access co-ordinator at Kilfinan Community Forest, reports*

**T**EN YEARS OF planning came to fruition when Kilfinan Community Forest (KCFC) announced the registration of first three new woodland crofts this summer.

Crofting has been on the Tighnabruaich social enterprise's agenda since the foundation of the working group to bring the forest into community ownership in 2007. Now the project's supporters aim to show that, as well as being an important part of the country's history, crofting can provide a solution to many of the problems facing rural Scotland in the 21st century.

Set on the picturesque Kyles of Bute, Tighnabruaich and the surrounding areas face all of the issues that affect highland Scotland: an ageing population, a preponderance of holiday homes, a shortage of year-round work, rural isolation and falling school rolls. For KCFC the solution to many of these problems lies in attracting families to the area to stimulate economic activity and support local services.

Operations manager Rob Borruso explained: "Although conifer plantation forestry dominates much of Argyll, it doesn't provide many jobs for

local people. The woodland croft model where people can manage pieces of our land for the benefit of their families, the community and the environment was the best way to make sure our main resource – the land itself – was used to support the community."

SCF's Patrick Krause echoed this point when he visited the Kilfinan Community Forest. "Scotland has a large forestry reserve," he said, "but most is managed under the Forestry Commission. In other countries the model is completely different. Forests are managed on a smaller scale, so it's great to see woodlands being created and managed by the people who live in or next to them.

"The main thing crofting offers to rural communities is people, so the more crofts you can create, the more people you can encourage to stay permanently, not just tourists or holiday home owners (although there's nothing wrong with that) but people who will raise families and support local services.

"With Brexit looming and Scotland being dragged out of the European Union, it's really important that we have resilient ways of living – and crofting is very much an embodiment of that."

As a result of crofting families being drawn to

the area, Tighnabruaich Primary has welcomed a reversal of falling pupil numbers.

The new crofters' attention will now turn to regenerating their land: transforming it from clear-felled conifer stumps with bracken, rushes and brash piles into native broadleaf woodland producing firewood, forest products and food. Woodland crofts help Scotland to meet other national priorities such as reducing food miles, lowering emissions and improving food security. Unsurprisingly, the idea has grown in popularity, leading to increased demand for plots of land.

Jamie McIntyre, co-ordinator for the Woodland Crofts Partnership, confirmed that there are many people ready to take on the challenge. "Hopefully this will inspire other woodland owners – community, public and private – to develop woodland crofts, for which there is huge unmet demand. We maintain a register which includes over 160 names. So while Kilfinan Community Forest has shown the way, we need many more crofts to be created over the coming years."

The Woodland Crofts Partnership is a partnership between SCF, the Community Woodlands Association, the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust and Woodland Trust Scotland.

<http://woodlandcrofts.org>



Patrick Krause at Kilfinan



Kilfinan clear fell where the three crofts will be sited



**A**LISTAIR MACIVER MBE, from Inchcape in Rogart, Sutherland, was a founding member of the SCU, a branch and council member and latterly a respected SCU president.

After the reincarnation of the Scottish Crofters Union into SCF, Alistair was the organisation's first company secretary. He was honoured with an MBE in 2015 for his services to the crofting community. The photo shows Alistair, his wife Betty and Jim Hunter, with the Lady Lieutenant of Sutherland, Dr Monica Main, who presented the medal on behalf of the Queen.

Alistair is now enjoying a well-earned retirement, having assigned his croft to Jonathan and Mairi Hedges.

## CROFT DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSIFICATION

# Did you hear the one about the Glaswegian who learnt to milk a goat?

*It would be misleading to say there was a plan, writes SCF member Ros O'Connor.*

**B**EFORE COMING TO Skye, friends joked about us becoming crofters.

We only had a quarter acre so we got chickens. I went to ask an elderly neighbour if she had any objections to us getting a cockerel and she and her relatives shared stories about their crofting activities.

Their goat stories caught my attention and I was hooked. Gerry thought it was another daft idea of mine, but this neighbour let us use a small field. We got a shelter and three goats – mum and two kids. I defy anyone not to like goats; they are friendly, mischievous, curious and do stuff just because they can!

Someone asked about goats' milk soap. Her daughter's a chef and washing her hands so much exacerbated her eczema. I learnt

how and got good results; she now uses nothing else – and no eczema. We gave it to family and friends who then gave to others; that's how "Goatlicious", our goats' milk soap production, started.

Gerry had worked on a farm every school holiday, so we bought a buck for breeding and the Eilean a' Cheo goat herd was created. Another neighbour let us use a shed for storage and an overgrown field, but the goats soon had it tamed to lush grass. Goats bred by us are happily living on other crofts on Skye and further afield.

While on North Uist, Gerry arranged to swap a goat for 10 Hebridean ewes, starting the Eilean a' Cheo sheep flock. Our 49 Hebrideans have a couple of fields to graze thanks to the generosity of another neighbour. They are a slow-maturing breed that we sell to local restaurants. We also sell the fleeces. Gerry now has Boreray sheep which

are on the RBST watchlist, his conservation contribution.

We didn't come to Skye to be crofters; the opportunities arose, and if not for generous neighbours letting us use some of their land it wouldn't have happened. Finding affordable land to rent or buy is difficult, but we have managed to buy a croft and the

goats and Hebrideans will graze it into shape in no time.

This gives us more opportunities, possibly other goats' milk products? Some hives – have you ever tasted heather honey?

[www.goatlicious.com](http://www.goatlicious.com)

[www.eileanacheogoats.com](http://www.eileanacheogoats.com)



## Self-build labour costs



**S**CF HAD AN enquiry about whether labour costs for a self-build project could be part of the cost of building a house for the purposes of calculating a grant level under the Croft House Grant Scheme (CHGS). It has been confirmed by Scottish Government that this cost cannot be included.

Under the Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme the cost of the crofter's labour very sensibly can be included as a legitimate cost. The grant criteria states: "Where the work is undertaken by either you or an employee, the labour costs can also be applied for. The value of your

labour will be assessed by your local area office and the rates we use are based on, but not linked to, the Agricultural Wages Board. Where labour costs are claimed they must be supported with completed timesheets which will be issued to you with your grant offer and claim form."

It seems to be an oversight that the same rules do not apply for building a house as building a shed. Furthermore this would support self-build, something that we strongly advocate as a means to affordable housing. SCF is therefore pressing for this anomaly to be rectified and labour to be accepted as a legitimate cost.



# Argyll croft woodlands

Iona Hyde, croft woodland project officer for Argyll and Lochaber, reports.

**T**HE CROFT Woodland Project (CWP), launched in 2015 in the Highlands and Islands, was extended into Argyll in 2016.

In Argyll, the project is run by Woodland Trust Scotland (WTS) in partnership with SCF, Forestry Commission Scotland, and Argyll Small Woodlands Co-op and is supported through the Heritage Lottery Fund. The aim is to provide assistance to crofters, smallholders and communities within Argyll who want to create new native woodlands. The project also provides advice on management of existing native woodlands.

Help is available to access funding through the SRDP Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS). FGS planting grants are available to establish a range of native woodland types, including upland birch wood, upland oak wood, native Scots pine, small farm woods and native low-density broadleaves.

In September FCS announced that the higher Western and Northern Isles planting grant



Baliscate Croft, Tobermory, Isle of Mull – a new shelterbelt is to be planted along the trackside field boundary using the Woodland Trust's MOREwoods scheme

(£3600/ha) for native broadleaves has now been extended to suitable planting sites throughout all of the crofting counties. This higher rate is aimed at sites with high exposure where high-density planting is required to establish woodlands. Capital grants for operations necessary to ensure woodland establishment such as fencing, gates and bracken control are also available through FGS, and a higher rate of deer fencing grant (£9.90/m) is available for much of Argyll.

For small-scale planting of new native woodland, such as in-by woodland planting and

shelterbelts, CWP can also assist through the Woodland Trust's MOREwoods scheme. The CWP adviser will help design a suitable planting scheme and WTS will contribute at least 60% of the costs of trees and protective guards. Within Argyll at least 10 sites are due to be planted through MOREwoods this coming winter, ranging in size from 0.25ha to 3ha. Schemes approved for planting include a croft on Islay, a mixed-use smallholding in Benderloch, an uninhabited island in the Sound of Jura and land at an outdoor education centre on Mull.

If you are thinking about planting a new native woodland or have existing native woodland to expand or regenerate and would like to discuss how the Croft Woodland Project can help, please contact Iona Hyde, Croft Woodland project officer for Argyll and Lochaber, on 0343 770 5460, or email at [IonaHyde@woodlandtrust.org.uk](mailto:IonaHyde@woodlandtrust.org.uk).

*If you are in the Highlands or the Western or Northern Isles, please email [crofting@woodlandtrust.org.uk](mailto:crofting@woodlandtrust.org.uk) and the Croft Woodland project officer for your area will be in touch.*



**WOODLAND**  
TRUST SCOTLAND

## Trees for the crofting community

**Trees provide important shelter for your livestock, crops and buildings and a valuable source of woodfuel for you.**

Free advice and support to help the crofting community plant trees and manage woodland is available.

Get in touch with your local croft woodlands advisor and find out how useful trees are.

## CROFT DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSIFICATION

# Hard work, vision and energy

SCF member *Ian McLean* shows what hard work can achieve on his and *Robert Panic's* formerly run-down croft in Galtrigill, Isle of Skye.

**WE** TOOK ON our croft in 2011 as new entrants with no agricultural experience but with a willingness to learn, a clear vision and lots of energy.

The croft extends to 11 hectares and is situated on an exposed shore-side location near the headland of Loch Dunvegan on the Isle of Skye. Although inactive for many decades, the tenant and family wanted to see the croft come back to life but were unable to do so themselves. There was no infrastructure on the croft, no tracks, the fencing was in a bad condition, the drainage ditches overgrown and the fields were waist-high in bracken.

Our aim is to create a successful diversified croft, a home and to find a different and healthier way of life. Like many Highlanders, I was drawn away from my village for further education and the career opportunities of the city. Robbie has always known the city but we both share a love of nature, wildlife and the outdoors – in particular the west coast and Skye. We also share a need to be active, to experience and to learn.

We set ourselves a fairly detailed five-year plan. To improve our rural skills we enrolled on a part-time course at the local college and attended as many relevant courses from the SCF and SAC as possible. The SCF crofting induction course is essential for new crofters and those wanting to refresh their knowledge. Another valuable way to learn is from our neighbouring crofters who we found most welcoming and keen to share their experiences.

The crofting grant scheme helped us create the basic infrastructure for an active croft – a croft track, a shed and fencing. The scheme can be an administration headache but we strongly advise that you persevere; the grant is there for the benefit of crofting.

With our trusty spades we manually opened up the overgrown ditches to improve drainage. A



pond was created to hold a supply of fresh water for the croft and to benefit wildlife. The waist-high bracken took three years of cutting several times a year for it to disappear and for the grasses to take over. We applied lime to the fields from the local quarry.

We initially introduced a small number of

Hebridean sheep to test the fencing and more importantly for us to learn from. They are great conservation grazers and we believe that the terrain and vegetation of the croft suit them better. They also look cool!

Having now had a few years of lambing, shearing and treating we find it hard work but massively rewarding. The fleeces go to a local business, Island at the Edge, where it is spun and sold as yarn or as woollen garments. We also plan to create our own sheepskin rugs from a local tannery, SkyeSkyns. The meat is incredible, low in fat with a gamey flavour and we hope that a market for it develops. To help this, Skye desperately needs a local abattoir.

We are keen horticulturists; we love to grow our own produce – a challenge on an exposed west coast croft and with roaming deer. A small area of the croft was deer and rabbit fenced and hardy hedging planted. Escalonia, hazel, oleria and dog rose worked well. To extend the season and variety of crops we also erected a poly tunnel. Soil testing identified a need for liming and for lots of seaweed. We grow a range of soft fruits and hardy vegetables through to tender salads. Our produce is sold during the summer at the local weekly Glendale Highland Market, which we helped set up, and to some of the fine restaurants in the area.

Last year I became clerk of the newly re-established grazings committee. We have performed a community muirburn and are currently in the process of updating the boundary fence – the first township project in over 30 years. Grazings are an important asset for all crofts and often overlooked or neglected.

In addition to our own home we built a holiday accommodation, An Airigh, which has been essential in subsidising the development of the croft. A successful diversified croft has always required a mix of income sources and tourism is another opportunity to be considered.

The croft has been transformed and brought back to life. Achieving this has been hard work but the rewards and wealth of new experiences has been more than worth it.

## CROFT DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSIFICATION

# Young crofters kick-start new glamping business

**WE ALL KNOW** how difficult it can be to get a new crofting business idea off the ground.

Having the capital investment, time investment and energy can be a challenge. Two SCF young crofters were struggling to realise their business dreams until they decided to work together.

Aspiring young crofter Rachel Butterworth bought a yurt in June to live in up Strathglass, near Beaulieu. However, with a change in work situation, and being offered a cottage in Strathglass, she found she no longer needed it. She considered selling it, but thought there was surely a better business option.

Rachel's friend Maddy Norval – another SCF young crofter – had considered starting an eco-glamping business on her croft at Rogart, but was struggling with the huge capital investment required to buy the pods, bell tents or huts that tourists would stay in. This is where the pair had a brainwave – why didn't they combine their resources – Rachel's yurt and Maddy's croft – to start a new business venture together? The croft is five minutes from the NC500 route and local B&Bs and hotels had experienced a big upsurge in visitors in recent months.

On the croft are Hebridean sheep, Shetland cows, Brecon Buff geese and a polytunnel for veg growing. Maddy has accessed the Young Farmers' Start Up Grant and the Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme with the 30% young entrants increase. She is also in the AECS scheme.

In August, Rachel, Maddy and Lucy (Maddy's mother and fellow crofter) put up the yurt in a beautifully secluded, heather-covered part of the croft. Surrounded by birch woodland, sheep and cows, the new glamping business was now a reality. The three lady crofters reclaimed furniture, rugs and kitchenware to kit out the yurt, created a listing on Airbnb and voilà!

But the project hasn't been without its challenges – the yurt has had to withstand strong winds and heavy autumnal rain (to which it has fared well so far). The compost loo has needed new steps, and visitors have been educated about good farm etiquette.

But Rachel and Maddy are confident that after a trial period, which will include the rigours of a Scottish winter, The Heather Yurt will be ready to welcome many new people to the croft in 2018.



Maddy in the yurt

# Finding the ideal combination

*Helen O'Keefe outlines the development of her three crofts in Elphin, a small township in Assynt.*

**I BOUGHT THE** crofts last December and currently have 13 Shetland sheep, seven of them 2017 lambs, four Black Rock hens and a Scots Grey cockerel.

The crofts came with a house which I share with my mother, and a café, The Elphin Tearooms, which is one reason I haven't made much progress on croft matters this year!

The crofts are currently all pasture, although I have fenced off a small vegetable garden and planted a variety of native trees on steeper sections of the slopes. The trees will provide extra shelter for stock, improve ecological diversity and make the place look less bare. My initial priorities for the croft are to expand the sheep flock, deer fence the majority of the croft, erect a polytunnel and build a larger chicken house.

I want to improve the sheep flock to produce high-quality spinning wool, as well as decent-sized carcasses for meat. We will spin and knit some of the wool ourselves and sell surplus wool to niche markets. Meat will, likewise, be partly for ourselves but also for sale. There are other Shetland keepers in the area with whom we hope to collaborate on both these fronts.

I'd like to breed Scots Greys as a dual purpose fowl – eggs for the café, selling



surplus to the public, and for meat, mainly for home use but also for local sales. I'll also investigate other breeds but my priority is to develop sustainable, healthy and productive chickens (ie meat, eggs and good mothering).

The polytunnel and vegetable patch should allow me to grow most of the salad greens for the café, and other vegetables to feature in café meals, plus additional food for the house. I'll also investigate growing berries, herbs, fruit trees and other crops.

The café is a key part of this venture. As well as providing supplemental income in the summer (at the cost of most of my time unfortunately), it gives us a marketplace for our products – knitted goods, raw wool, potentially jams etc – and a ready customer for our produce: salad greens, vegetables, berries and eggs "sold" to the café.

Other potential projects include bee keeping (the trees will help with this) and milking goats. Being able to use the common grazings to support my sheep for most of the year is crucial for achieving these other projects.

The previous crofter ran Cheviots. He died a few years ago and his wife put the crofts, house and café on the market together in 2015. Several parties wanted the café but not the crofts, and several wanted the crofts but not the house/café. For me, needing a house, work and wanting some land, it was the perfect package and luckily I could scrape up the money to buy it.

## CROFT DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSIFICATION

# Birth of a croft

*SCF member Beads describes his revival of a derelict croft on the Isle of Skye.*

**I**T WAS JUST a wee scrap of land between the road and the sea, a steep wooded burn one side and the “mighty” Caroy the other, needing some TLC (tender loving crofting).

Fences down, overgrazed, a run-down stone bothy. Luckily my itinerant jobbing had left me with a fair range of skills, so we set about fencing, new larch homemade gates, ditches dug to shed the run-off from the roads, easy with my new discovery – the mattock.

Then came the “hurricane” of 2005. The sea rose, clattered the fences, wrecked the gates and dumped loads of rubbish and degraded plastic on the low-lying land. A depressing outlook greeted us the next day. Taking a deep breath, and with some help from friends, we began to clear up.

Since the croft is a series of raised beaches separated by flat areas, we planted trees on the banks and kept the meadows for grazing and hay. I have only had one summer in 20

years when the weather was too bad for hay. That delight as you toss the drying grasses in the breeze, breathing in the summer ripeness, stored to be released in the cool of winter.

The wee bothy was taken down and the stone used to rebuild. Local green timber from local sawmills was left to season for the roof and flooring, and what remained made into windows and doors. We decided to purchase the local wool crop for insulation, adding cedar sawdust to put off rodents. Trying to keep things local, reclaimed Ballachulish slates for the roof, lintels rescued from bulldozed piles of stone.

Money was tight; we couldn't afford to put in mains electric, so we decided to have a micro-hydro in the burn. Harris Hydro in California provided the gubbins, the water board the pipes (maybe unwittingly, but that's a story for another day), whilst roofing for a fish-farming friend provided the heavy-duty cable. The burn changes, pools migrate; you realise how the land changes over time. The final piece of the jigsaw arrived, for the princely sum of a half-bottle and half-ounce of baccy,



RIP Johnny Day, in the form of a 40-year-old Rayburn – the nerve centre, providing heating, hot water and cooking during the dark days of winter, and of course a healthy firewood habit. They say it heats you twice; I think it knackers you once and heats you once.

To keep the grass down we acquired a small herd of angora goats. Some of their wool was spun, dyed and woven into lovely scenic wall-hangings by the talented, late Rosalind Burgess. The hay keeps them through the winter. Only Biglein now remains, born on the croft, an orphan, bottle reared in a basket by the Rayburn.

Meanwhile we had to establish gardens, which means pigs and proper pork. These tremendous animals dig and plough for you. All you need to do then is create your beds and grow your veg, and of course feast on their fine flesh. Two large gardens were created this way.

The beds were originally wood, which of course rots and needs replaced, so over the last few years we have gleaned broken-up plastic cages from the defunct local fish farm and used the tubes to create the beds, which can never rot and being black absorb heat. Local culverts in the roads were concrete “troughs”. A few years ago these were removed and left on the roadsides. I realised they could be used to create other permanent veg

beds, the only drawback being they weigh 50kg each. Luckily we are not afraid of hard graft.

Our chickens provide us with fresh eggs, courtesy of Donald “there are no grants in hens” from Struan, proving chasing grants is not always the best option. A wee orchard provides fresh apple juice, damsons and blackcurrants. The veg beds produce onions, leeks, beans, tatties, swede, beetroot, kale, garlic. We now get orphan lambs, grazing them for meat, lovely Hebridean and Soays, keeping the females for future breeding. The mint in the garden cannot wait...

In the last few years I have been making beehives. The first honey harvest was one of the most exciting things I have done in years. The amber nectar glistening in the summer sun, the smooth sweetness dripping on the tongue...

Other buildings have been completed – a workshop/hay loft, composting toilet and a summerhouse. Since I am mainly a carpenter, I decided that in such a wet environment wooden-clad buildings are taboo. Wooden structures are slated, with velux windows, a low maintenance option, well able to keep out the driving coastal rains, and allow you to indulge the inner artist.

Many of these things and more can be seen on Chapelcroftcreatures Facebook page.

## ON THE CROFT



## Bracken: fuel or foe – timing is critical

**B**RACKEN IS plentiful, with UK coverage estimated in 2000 to have increased by 6.4% between 1990 and 2000.

Post BSE and the massive reduction in hill cattle in Scotland, bracken coverage has visually increased across the whole country. We should take a different view of the plant before we lose even more ground. The approach taken for the University of Aberdeen programme was to investigate productive uses of bracken to at least offset the cost of harvesting.

Bracken as a source of biomass does not require planting, fertilisation or use of biocides. It produces large quantities of biomass on land that is often unsuitable for other species that could be cropped; and in pelleted form is generally equivalent to coal as a fuel. The mean calorific value of bracken litter collected from four sites across Scotland was 19.5 MJ/kg DM, suitable for potential use as biofuel, comparing favourably with the average of 18.3 MJ/kg DM for other native plant species. Yields vary considerably with time of year, location and weather, ranging from 5 to >15 t DM/ha.

The time to harvest bracken depends on the outcomes required. Frond dry matter yields increased to maximum in August/September, falling in November when the fronds

are more accurately described as litter. If volume of material is required, for adding bulk to compost or for animal bedding, late summer harvest is required. The dry, later litter material is suitable for mulching or burning, although we need to remember that if we leave bracken litter too long on the ground, many of the plant nutrients will be leached into the soil, to feed the bracken rhizome below.

Fronn mulch reduced losses of soil-available potash by 41 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> compared to bare ground. Litter mulch reduces losses of soil available nitrogen by 11.6 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>. Both bracken mulches maintained higher mean soil temperatures compared to bare soil, with an average increase of 0.4 °C for litter mulch and 0.75 °C for fronn mulch. It doesn't sound much but to a plant can be worth a few days earlier emergence.

Harvesting bracken can be used not only as a control strategy for a plant that has devoured huge tracts of land, but also as a method of extracting uses from that harvest. As with all good weed control, timing of action is important; and keep the eye firmly fixed on the benefits.

*With acknowledgements to Dr Eric Donnelly and The Kintail Land Research Foundation.*

*Jamie Robertson  
Livestock Management  
Systems Ltd, Aberdeen*

## Toradh festival celebrates food of the Uists



Could Uist be a land of milk and honey? Panel discussion with Sarah MacLean (beekeeper, Barra), Matthew Topsfield (Allotment Association, Benbecula), Mary Norton (Dexter cattle, North Uist), Kathy Biss (cheesemaker, Wester Ross), chaired by Wendy Barrie (Slow Food Scotland).

*Mary Norton on an innovative local event*

**C**OMMUNITIES UP and down the Uists, from Berneray to Lochboisdale, celebrated the food and food producers of the islands during the Toradh (Harvest) Festival in August.

More than 40 events took place, with over 1000 attendances from islanders and visitors. The goal was

to be a key part of a sustainable food chain, as well as supporting rural communities. Events such as Toradh and its successors raise awareness and offer tools for a better-balanced food system.

One outcome will be a conference in February 2018, organised by the Grimsay Community Association and led by Kathy Biss of the West Highland Dairy, with the aim of enabling dairy and cheese production in the islands once again. Although there was a strong dairying tradition as recently as the 1960s, skills and facilities have all but disappeared.

Traditional dairying never had to conform to modern food hygiene regulation. The Bring Back Dairy conference will address the practicalities of raising dairy animals (cows, sheep, goats), cheese production and

marketing, environmental impacts and regulation. The conference aims to bring up-to-date practical information to crofters and others who might be considering going into dairy or cheese-making.

*To register interest in Bring Back Dairy, please email [info@grimsay.org](mailto:info@grimsay.org), or by post to Ceann na h-Àirigh, Grimsay, North Uist HS6 5JA.*

*TORADH was organised by a local partnership of community organisations including Ceòlas, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Cothrom, Grimsay Community Association, Islands Book Trust, Nunton Steading Trust, Salar Smokehouse and Tagsa Uibhist, with support from Awards for All, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, Caledonian MacBrayne, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Scottish Natural Heritage and the SnBM Community Fund.*



Roddy MacLean explains uses and Gaelic names of plants on the croft at Kenary, Grimsay

to link people who grow food, make food, eat food and write about food in an environment where a lot of food is produced – the crofting and fishing communities of the Uists. Crofters talked with food writers; bee keepers discussed with cheese-makers; people cooked for each other and for their communities.

The Toradh Festival reached food consumers and producers across a wide age range with serious discussion and wide community input. It brought attention to Uist's greatest strength and significant weakness: our bounty of resources – both human and natural – and, so far, a limited ability to add value and increase self-sufficiency in the local food system.

Our crofting areas have the challenge of small primary producers facing the big food industry; but local production can

## ON THE CROFT

# Donald's Hortiblog

**O**PINIONS DIFFER ON the merits of raised beds.

In SCF's highly-regarded publication *Horticulture: A Handbook for Crofters*, Dr Audrey Litterick, leading authority on horticulture in the challenging conditions we all have to work with, addresses the arguments for and against.

On the negative side, there is the cost of construction and loss of space resulting from access paths between growing areas. More seriously, the incredibly complex substance we know as soil needs bulk, both depth and width, in order to function as we want it to, providing adequate rooting capacity for crops as well as sufficient water and nutrition. The vital interaction of minerals, organic matter, air and water with the essential invertebrate, microbial and fungal life will be inhibited by constricted space.

On the other hand, the benefits to be had are ease of access for soil preparation, crop planting and management; better targeting of water and feed; building up shallow soils; mitigating drainage issues; and, very important this, the soil doesn't get compacted because you don't need to stand on it. Raised beds also assist with crop rotation, especially in polytunnels. They lend themselves to a variety of high-value crops such as strawberries, salad leaves and herbs, where a lot can be produced in a small area. They are



not so suitable for things that need a lot of space, like potatoes and the cabbage family.

We recently spent a week in Harris and were reminded that raised beds are nothing new. On the hillsides around Scarista and Northton are vast areas of ancient *feannagan*, the cultivation method known outwith the Gaeltacht as rig and furrow, where the soil was mounded into raised strips between drainage channels. For thousands of years land worked in this fashion supported a population much larger than today's. In more recent times, the people cleared from the good machair land to the rocky Bays of Harris were forced to build up small plots of arable land on the bare rock using the materials available: peat, clay and seaweed.

Modern raised bed construction usually employs a timber support, typically two courses

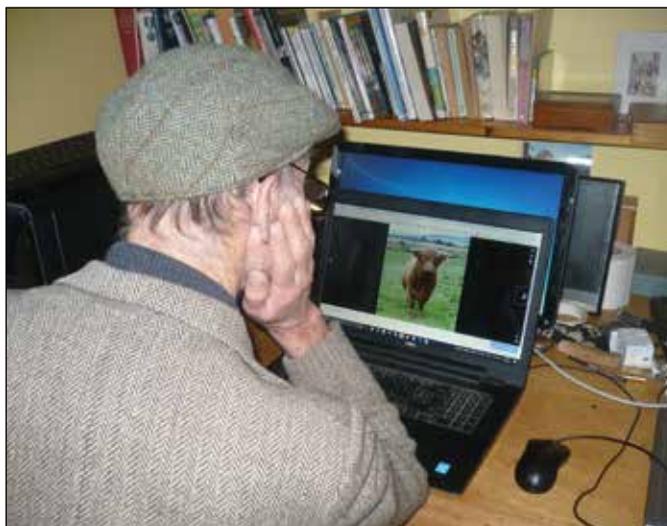
of six-by-one-inch sarking, enclosing a bed approximately four feet wide, as this is a width that can be worked comfortably from each side. Where possible, they should be built on a substrate of natural soil which will permit beneficial invertebrate and microbial activity. They will not work so well on inert surfaces such as hardcore. In whatever situation soil in raised beds will tend to be cropped intensively so it will need regular feeding with bulky organic matter, which will also help water retention on light soils. Getting the soil analysed professionally every few years is a very good investment.

The picture shows raised beds on our former croft in Lewis growing a good crop of broccoli. We built these to improve the drainage of the heavy, peat-based soil. The edging is formed of heavy timber from old fish farm cages.

## A' strì leis an teicneòlas

**G**ED A BHIODH tu a' cumail ris na dòighean tradiseanta ann an croitearachd gun a bhith an sàs ann an margaideachd no reic tro bhùthan, bhiodh tu fhathast ann am feum coimpiutair.

Cha ghabh e seachnadh san latha an-diugh. Eadar ghrantaichean, gluasadan bheothaichean, VAT, agus foirmichean IACS, 's ann tro Theicneòlas Fiosrachaidh no Information Technology (IT) a bhios a h-uile teachdaireachd a' falbh agus a' tighinn. Mura bheil thu suas ris, no cleachdte ris, tha seo na dhùbhlán mòr, agus na adhbhar do chuid a dhaoine, gu h-àraid an fheadhainn as sine, a bhith a' sguir uile gu lèir. Tha mi fhìn gnàthaichte ri coimpiutairean nam obair làitheil ach fhathast air mo shàrachadh leis an uiread de dh'fhacal-faire a dh'fheumas mi airson faighinn a-staigh gu làraichean lìn. 'S iomadh turas



a chaidh mi gu CTS gus innse mu bheith laoi agus mi air am facal-faire dhiochumhneachadh. Gheibh

thu greim air sin a rithist, ach nan do chail thu an "user id" cuideachd feumaidh tu an uair sin dol tro na

dearbhadhann gus an aithnich iad nach e cealgair a th' annad. Tha leabhar beag agam a-nis far am bi mi a' sgrìobhadh a h-uile facal-faire a dh'fheumas mi!

Uaireannan bidh taobh èibhinn sa chùis ge-tà. Cha do rinn mise riamh mòran textadh agus chan eil mi cho adhartach 's gu bheil fear de na fònaichean sin a cheangaileas ris an eadar-lìn agam ach chuir mi a-mach post-dealain o chionn goirid a' faighneachd de chroitearan mu àireamhan caoraich sa bhaile. Chuir dà fhreagairt nam bheirlich mi – croitearan aig an robh (am measg eile) glimmers agus welders. Nach e na fònaichean sin a tha feumach air gliocas – predictive text ann no às. 'S math nach deachaidh mi a-mach air a mhonadh a' sireadh biùgan solais bho luchd-tàthaidh seach dìonagan is muil!

*le Gabhan Mac a' Phearsain*

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## Alasdair Allan MSP/BPA

If anybody would like to meet with Alasdair Allan, Member of the Scottish Parliament for the Western Isles, he can be contacted using the following details:

*Ma tha duine sam bith ag iarraidh coinneachadh ri Alasdair Allan, Ball-Pàrlamaid na h-Alba airson nan Eilean Siar faodaidh sibh a cleachdadh na seòlaidhean a leanas:*



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**Telephone/Àireamh-Fòn:**  
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ON THE CROFT

# Innovative fertiliser trials on the Isle of Skye



The slow-release fertiliser trial which was kindly hosted by Mr Duncan, Feorlig, Skye



Urea-based fertilisers with a castor oil coating means they release more slowly. One product is 45% slow release whereas the other is 90% slow release

SAC's Janette Sutherland reports

**I** AM A STRONG believer in the importance of communication between scientists and crofters to solve problems which face modern-day crofting. A good example of this came from the UIF-funded grassland improvement group on Skye.

The first meeting of the group took place in a silage field in north-west Skye. At the meeting, one of the attendees shared his concerns about spreading fertiliser mid-May for fields involved in late cutting for comcrakes, when it would not be cut till August or later. "In our wet climate was there a chance the nitrogen fertiliser was being washed away?"

He wanted to avoid a heavy application in case the crop became lush too early and lodged, and noted that ideally you would apply more later in the season, but that is prohibited under the rules.

SRUC grassland expert David Lawson pondered this and shared his knowledge of slow-release fertilisers used in other industries but not in agriculture in this country, for example the

fertilisers used for sports. Canadian agriculture makes wider use of such products. The group expressed interest in this.

David contacted the company and got samples of the products not yet sold in the UK for the group to trial. This was undertaken in two sites on Skye: a croft in Feorlig where the grassland group met and Waternish Farm which is the Farm Advisory Service (FAS) nutrient network farm on Skye.

The products tested in the trial were:

- Spring N application rate – 80 kg N/ha ( 8 g/ m<sup>2</sup> )
- Treatments –
- E45 ( 44%N) (45% slow release)
- E90 (44%N) (90% slow release)
- Nitram (35%N) (100% quick release)
- Control (no fertiliser)

Further tests on the fresh and dry yield of the plots are under way. The nutritional quality of the various plots will also be measured.

It is early days and more work needs to be undertaken before we can say whether there is

a commercial role for this product. However, it is clear that there are visible differences caused by the slow-release coating and when predictions suggest that climate change may make our climate wetter, altering our approach to fertiliser may be all the more necessary.

Treatment	Average difference in sward height over 5 weeks
E90 (90% slow release)	14.1 cm
E45 (45% slow release)	12.9cm
Nitram (all quick release)	11.1cm
no application control	6.5cm

Results from Feorlig trial. There were immediate differences between the plots, both in colour and amount of grass.

## Free mentoring support for new crofters and farmers

**I**F YOU ARE a new crofter, or have set up business in the last five years, you are entitled to free support through the Farm Advisory Service's mentoring programme. This can give you access to the valuable skills and knowledge of an experienced mentor, matched to your needs – invaluable help during the setting up and early years of your crofting business.

**Typical skills that mentors could offer include:**

- experience of running a croft business
- traditional skills such as stone walling, hedge laying etc
- choosing the correct stock
- managing grassland
- food and drink industry experience.

To download your mentoring application form head to the FAS website [www.fas.scot](http://www.fas.scot), or telephone the Farm Advisory Service advice line on 0300 323 0161 to obtain a hard copy of the form.



## ON THE CROFT

# AECS and pains on the croft



© Sarah Allison

Delegates inspecting a grassland water margin, and discussing the pros and cons of fencing it off to reduce diffuse pollution

*Sarah Allison, farming and land use manager at Soil Association Scotland, reports on a recent workshop held at Badrallach, near Dundonnell, overlooking Little Loch Broom.*

**S**OIL ASSOCIATION Scotland and the Farm Advisory Service's workshop aimed to help crofters get the most out of the Agri-Environment and Climate Scheme (AECS), which offers land managers payments for specific activities that are beneficial to the environment.

The day started with a croft walk, led by SAC Consulting's senior conservation advisor, Gillian McKnight. Gillian took the group round the 11-acre croft, run by Lucy Robison and her husband. We looked at a variety of habitats that are commonly found on Highland crofts and the eligible options in the locality, including species-rich grasslands, grassland water margins, wetlands, heath and improved grassland. Gillian talked the group through the identifying features of each habitat type, the wildlife they support, and how they could be managed under AECS to enhance or improve their condition.

An in-depth discussion on different options for fencing and managing grasslands highlighted that where an area of land is eligible to be entered into an AECS option, the capital costs for either permanent stock fencing, or temporary electric fencing can be

claimed – especially beneficial to new entrants for long-term improvements to croft infrastructure. Other stand-alone capital items were discussed, including hard standings and livestock crossings for reducing erosion and run-off into water courses. These options are only available in key areas to reduce diffuse pollution.

The group was taken through the basic principles of a grazing management plan and how applications are scored, with some final top tips for those considering an application in 2018:

Get help – funding is available to assist with the farm environment survey and some management plans.

Talk to your neighbours and local conservation advisors who can offer advice on specific local species such as wader birds, or local priority catchments.

Consider your short, medium and long-term goals for the croft environment – if a scheme doesn't fit with your priorities just now, do not be disheartened – they do not work for everyone.

*This event was jointly funded by the Farm Advisory Service and through SRDP Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Fund (which is jointly funded by the Scottish Government and the European Union) with partner funding from Scottish Water and RSPB Scotland. This event is part of a wider KTIF programme, Farming With Nature.*

## Small-scale production of salad leaves in western Scotland

*A report by Irianna Vlachopoulou and Carol Kyle*

**C**ROFTERS ARE PRODUCING high-value, fresh salad leaves for high-end restaurants and direct consumption, as part of a surge in polytunnel use throughout western Scotland.

The James Hutton Institute invited small producers and other interested parties to a discussion on the production and distribution of such goods in Skye and Lochalsh and Lochaber, to gain insight into the way food is distributed from small farms and crofts and to highlight the challenges crofters and smallholders face, while trying to assess measures that could be taken to address them.

Spinach, chard, rocket and speciality varieties produced in the region are wholly distributed to local hotels and restaurants, individual chefs and consumers. On Skye, some producers have banded together with consumers and other supporters to set up a local distribution system, the Food Link Van. The van connects the producers with their customers through pre-arranged pickup and delivery services.

Production, however, is not affected only by distribution. Participants, even though they felt that there were opportunities for increasing production levels, voiced constraints including lack of time – many have full or part-time jobs; shortage of suitable labour – producers rely on student or transient workers; their age – many crofters are retired or close to retiring; and the difficulties many face when applying for grants or subsidies.

The meeting took place within the scope of the EU project SALSAs – Small farms, small food businesses, sustainable food and nutrition security. Visit the project website and sign up for updates:

[www.salsa.uevora.pt/en/stay-informed/](http://www.salsa.uevora.pt/en/stay-informed/)

*For more information, please contact:  
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tel: 01224 395307*



**The James  
Hutton  
Institute**

# A Food Commission for Scotland

**F**OLLOWING THE work done by Scottish Government and stakeholders on Scotland's Good Food Nation policy, a Food Commission has been launched.

The 15 members selected as food policy experts will develop a work programme based on priorities in the discussion document and subsequent consultation analysis.

The Food Commission's remit in its advisory (not executive) role is to:

- provide evidence-based advice on measures which will contribute most to making Scotland a Good Food Nation, addressing existing and potential future challenges facing Scotland's food culture; and
- advocate the importance of good food to Scotland's health and wellbeing, environment and quality of life.

The commission reports formally to the cabinet secretary for rural economy and connectivity and, through him, to cabinet. The group meets on a quarterly basis and will operate for a term of two to three years.

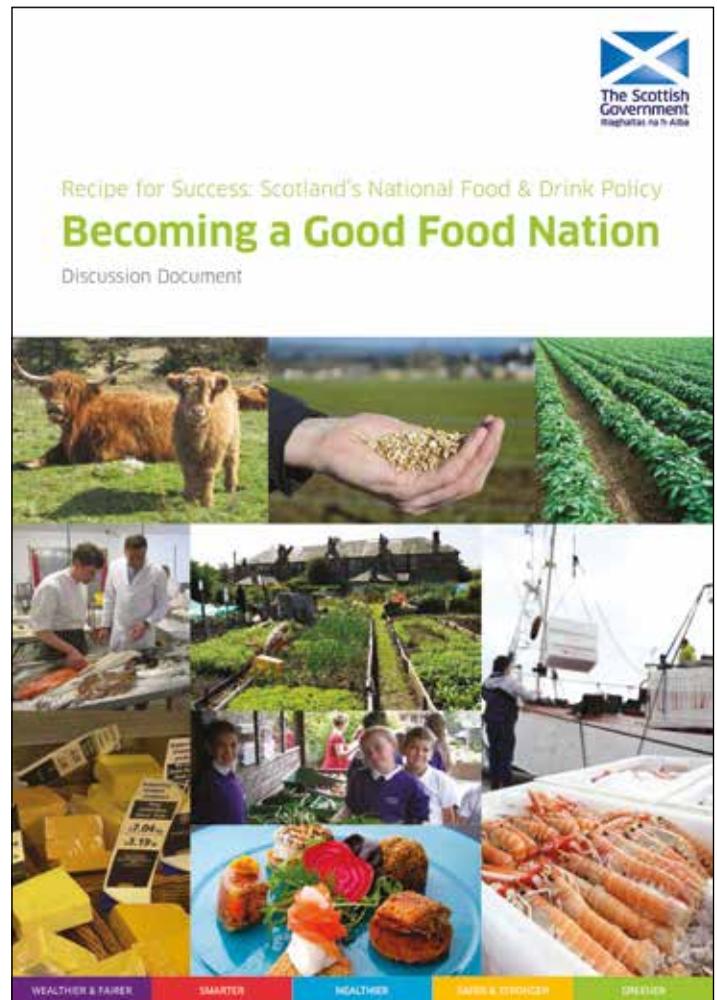
SCF attended the Food Commission summit organised at the end of September to gather views on the proposed Good Food Nation bill which will be consulted on and put before parliament. The vision for the bill is: 'that Scotland

is a Good Food Nation, a country where people from every walk of life take pride and pleasure in, and benefit from, the food they buy, serve and eat day by day.'

**To fulfil this vision will mean that:**

- it is the norm for Scots to take a keen interest in their food, knowing what constitutes good food, valuing it and seeking it out whenever they can;
- people who serve and sell food – schools, hospitals, retailers, cafes, restaurants – are committed to serving and selling good food;
- everyone in Scotland has ready access to the healthy, nutritious food they need;
- dietary-related diseases are in decline, as is the environmental impact of our food consumption;
- Scottish producers ensure that what they produce is increasingly healthy and environmentally sound;
- food companies are a thriving feature of the economy and places where people want to work;
- other countries look to Scotland to learn how to become a Good Food Nation.

Look out for the consultation when it is released and please respond to it. This is our food and our nation and we all have a vested interest in ensuring that the bill and therefore the act says what we want it to say.



## Spotlight on local produce

*Nourish Scotland organised a one-day networking event in October for newly-established and aspiring small food businesses from across Scotland, reports SCF young crofter Cheryl McIntyre.*

**A**S SOMEONE WITH a wee croft looking to start selling produce 'straight from the gate' it was an opportunity to meet aspiring and recently-established local food entrepreneurs, to share and learn about what it takes to get a local food enterprise off the ground and keep it going. As well as interested individuals, participants past and present from Nourish Scotland's programme Making a Living from Local Food were in attendance.

The venue was the Falkland Centre for Stewardship in Fife, with an evening meal afterwards in the Pillars of Hercules Café. An apt setting indeed as we got to meet the



owner/founder, various staff, and hear the story of how the multifaceted estate was set up and continues to run with trips either on tractor-drawn trailer round the organic suckler beef herd or along the road to Meadowsweet Organics to learn about growing fresh local produce.

The morning focussed on discussion and practical exercises to facilitate dialogue within

our own wee group. In the afternoon, speakers from the Farm Advisory Service, Soil Association, Business Gateway and Nourish Scotland informed us on available assistance, advice and support.

From these presentations I would encourage any new(ish) crofter (who has set up business in the last five years) to have a look particularly at the Farm Advisory Service new entrants website to see what help may be on offer. Experienced and skilled crofters can act as mentors to

these new entrants and teach practical skills or share knowledge, with funding of around £250 a day available (maximum of four days) for your time/skills/knowledge.

The broad message from all speakers was not to be afraid of asking questions, even in the very early stages of starting up – there are lots of different types of support available – just ask! <https://www.fas.scot/topic/new-entrants/>



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# Rural mental health



*Jim Hume of the National Rural Mental Health Forum highlights an important issue.*

**E**VEN THE ROYAL family is now open in talking about their mental health, helping to make it a normal conversation.

One in four Scots faces mental health problems at some point in their life; and recent research by Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) has shown that isolation and stigma can be more challenging in rural Scotland.

Following that SRUC research, the National Rural Mental Health Forum has been set up. The forum consists of organisations with expertise in mental health and organisations which have a good outreach into all parts of rural Scotland, such as SCF. The forum is using its network to influence government policy, already feeding into the new social security powers that Scotland will gain, and it has influenced the new ten-year mental health strategy.

The forum had a prominent presence at the Royal Highland Show this year. Scottish Government mental health minister Maureen Watt MSP announced support for the forum's work, in co-operation with cabinet secretary for rural economy and connectivity Fergus Ewing MSP.

The show gave the forum a good platform to discuss with decision-makers and the public

some of the challenges faced in rural Scotland. Challenges such as confiding in someone that your mental wellbeing may not be as good as you feel it should be; accessing services that may help, such as talking therapies; and reducing the stigma of being open about when you are unwell.

Physical illness has no stigma. People are happy to say they have had a broken leg or appendicitis. There is no reason we shouldn't be able to talk about having depression or anxiety. If untreated, mental illness can worsen with sometimes dire consequences. If noticed quickly and acted upon, early intervention and prevention can stop many conditions worsening and leads to many leading a full and healthy life.

The forum is now starting to encourage rural organisations to look at staff mental health first-aid training. This raises awareness of mental health issues, normalises talking about wellbeing, gives confidence in dealing with it and promotes that important early intervention.

We all know it is too easy to be frightened of approaching someone who may be facing a well-being crisis. Mental health first-aid training gives you the tools and confidence to intervene at an early stage and can prevent people reaching a crisis point.

## A helping hand for crofters



**R**SABI HAS BEEN supporting those in Scottish agriculture since 1897.

RSABI can help crofters and their dependants, whether still crofting or unable to croft due to age or health.

Welfare manager Mags Granger said, "We are here to help emotionally, practically and financially in times of need. Our helpline is open from 7am to 11pm every day. Whether it's housing or health, business issues or benefits – or you need someone to talk to – we are here to help. We want all members of the crofting community to get help before a problem becomes a crisis."

Crofters' business and home life are one and the same and RSABI understands that difficulties in one can lead to issues in the other. "We can access business efficiency advice for crofters who are finding that running the croft is having a detrimental effect on financial or mental wellbeing," Mags commented. "Having an experienced consultant look at the business and highlight options that may be available is invaluable when things are getting too much."

### **Real story:**

*Mr Scott continued to work even though he had been asked by his GP to stop. His health deteriorated to the point he had no choice but to stop. He has a wife and two young children to support. RSABI got involved and supported the family both emotionally and financially to ensure that the transition from work into benefits does not have a detrimental effect on the family. Mrs Scott said "We couldn't see any way out of our situation. We were on edge all the time. RSABI showed us there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Please do not sit and worry, RSABI is such a fantastic organisation and made a huge difference."*

**Please call RSABI's helpline. We are here to help.**



#### Introducing the Nicolsons.

They are crofters from Sconser on the Isle of Skye.

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## Company secretary

The SCF company secretary will be vacating his position at the AGM in 2018. Any person, whether member or not, can apply for this voluntary post. There will be a hand-over period in the lead-up to the change.

Applications should be made to the chief executive at HQ. As yet, no closing date has been fixed but the position will become available not later than June 2018.

Details of the role can be obtained from the present company secretary, John Bannister, through SCF HQ, or by email to [johnbannister@crofting.org](mailto:johnbannister@crofting.org). He will be pleased to discuss this with you.

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# A visit to St Kilda

*This summer my daughter and I visited the St Kilda archipelago, writes IG MacDonald.*

**S**T KILDA HAS dual world heritage site status for the marine and terrestrial natural landscape and the cultural landscape left by thousands of years of human occupation. The crofting inhabitants were finally forced to leave in 1930 when the depleted population made life on the islands no longer viable.

In 19th century national census reports, most of the family heads in Scotland's other west coast islands were described as farmer/fisherman, or crofter/fisherman; but St Kilda's were crofter/cragman or birdcatcher. Fishing in the stormy waters of the Atlantic was reckoned to be too dangerous, but scrambling on the sheer cliffs on hempen ropes, reinforced with salted cow-hide, to catch young fulmars for food and feather-rent, had become second nature to men and boys.

Although occupied for such a long time, the main island of Hirta only had its Village Bay township laid out by surveyors as recognised crofts in 1834, later than the other Western Isles. Previously, the traditional cultivation and grazing of the land was carried out on a communal, runrig basis and the houses were huddled together for shelter. The reorganisation was initiated by tacksman-tenant Donald MacDonald

of North Uist, who insisted that all horses be removed from the island; and a lengthy and tall head dyke be built to separate the arable fields from the common grazing area – a mammoth task. Twenty-one croft houses were built by stone-masons from Skye and the land was allocated to the St Kildans by casting lots.

Each family had a milking cow and planted traditional crops of bere and oats. Potatoes were introduced, but had not become as important as in other parts of the Highlands and Islands. In 1840, when potato blight struck, the consequences there were not as devastating as in many other places.

Associated with St Kilda are three breeds of sheep, all belonging to the Northern European short-tailed type – Soays, Borerays and the breed we now call Hebrideans. It is doubtful if there ever were any of the Hebridean breed on these islands, but it suited Victorian conservationists' romantic ideas to name them St Kilda sheep. The islands of Soay and Boreray belong to the archipelago and these sheep breeds presumably were native.

There are now no sheep on Soay, but National Trust for Scotland (NTS) keep a semi-feral flock of Soays on Hirta. The parent flock was moved from Soay to Hirta by the Marquess of Bute in the 1930s after the human population and their stock were evacuated.

NTS is engaged in scientific research with this

flock. The average sheep has become smaller over the years and flock numbers never reach equilibrium. Population growth exceeds the carrying capacity of the island, which eventually causes a dramatic population crash, and then the cycle repeats. For example, in 1989 the population fell by two thirds within 12 weeks. Other wild flocks of Soay sheep have now been established on Holy Isle off Arran and Lundy in the Bristol Channel.

Soays may be completely black or brown but are more often blonde or dark brown with a lighter-coloured underbelly and rump. *Lachdann* in Gaelic or *loaghtan* in Manx describes this pattern.

Borerays are one of the UK's rarest breeds, but the original flock still continues on that island. Males and females are horned, usually with one pair but occasionally two. Colours vary but most are grey or creamy-white. In the 1970s half a dozen of them were exported to form the basis of a breeding population on the mainland, but the majority of Borerays, some 300, remain in St Kilda. It is believed that Borerays, North Ronaldsays and Shetlands are all directly descended from the Iron Age Scottish Dunface breed.

Our visit included much more which may be of interest to historians, ornithologists, geologists and nature enthusiasts but these aspects are for another article.

## MEMBERS PAGES

## SCF membership for young and not-so-young

**E**IGHTY-NINE PER CENT of crofters recorded in the 2016 Crofting Commission census were aged over 40 years. SCF membership reflects that trend.

Attracting young people into crofting is a complex matter, but it is important to get young crofters on board and participating in crofting in order to secure its long-term future. A recent successful Facebook campaign to encourage young crofters to join SCF has seen thirty-five new members since July. If you know of any young crofters (aged 40 years and under) who are not currently members, please do encourage them to join by pointing out five good reasons why they should join today. These are in addition to the special young crofters' discounted membership fee of £31.50.

- They get strong political representation to help shape crofting policies for the benefit of future generations of crofters and their rural communities.
- They receive the highly-regarded journal *The Crofter* and a monthly e-newsletter along with the Register of Available Crofts.
- They get access to the members' support service and a free dedicated legal helpline provided by crofting law specialists, Inksters Solicitors.
- They get the opportunity to promote their croft tourism business on the SCF website and market their croft produce



© Skye Images

with the unique Scottish Crofting Produce Mark.

- They get the credibility of being a member of the UK's largest association of small-scale food producers.

Talking of young crofters, in recent weeks we have taken a few enquiries at HQ from members whose children and grandchildren are under the age of 16 and would like to become involved and become members. Currently, you have to be aged 16 or over to become a member. These young people are actively involved in

crofting, usually alongside another family member. At present we have no membership option for these young people. So we are considering the notion of a whole-household or family membership and how this would work in practice. Please drop an email to [hq@crofting.org](mailto:hq@crofting.org) if you have any comments or further suggestions.

Our recent drop-in surgeries held in the Ullapool and Kyle offices have proved useful in addressing individuals' specific crofting issues and just having a chat about crofting

in general. While we have these scheduled on a monthly basis, we would like you to know that we do operate an open-door policy at the Kyle office where members are welcome to drop in or telephone at any time with crofting questions.

We may not always have an immediate answer but we will get one for you! At the drop-in surgery we will always have an experienced caseworker, director or senior staff member available and if you would prefer to discuss your matter in private, you can make an appointment.

## Robin Ross



Robin at work on a landrover repair

**R**OBIN G ROSS was born in 1930 at Heatherlea, Ardgay, son of crofter Geordie Ross and his wife Nan. He was to become the fourth generation to work the Heatherlea croft.

Robin and his sister Sybil were brought up in the typical crofting way of life at the time. Homegrown oats for oatcakes, milk from their cows made into crowdie and of course hens, a pig and sheep. Youthful summers were enjoyably spent roaming the hills and fishing the river.

Primary schooling was nearby but he had to cycle into Gledfield to secondary school in rain, wind, sleet, snow and sunshine. Not for the strath folk in those days the luxury of being picked up by the school bus.

Robin learned how to look after animals from his father. After he left school, and various estate jobs, he studied at Craibstone Agricultural College near Aberdeen. As well as assisting on the croft, he became the relief postie and had a very successful contractor's business, fencing, reclaiming and reseeded land from heather, during the era of the great hill reclamations. He did this over a wide

area in the north and west of Scotland. He also constructed miles of fencing from Mull and Skye to Sutherland and Easter Ross.

Robin's wide-ranging experience was well used to improve his own croft. As a result, he was able to raise high-quality lambs and there was always great anticipation when the lamb sales came round. He knew the market and his hard work was usually well rewarded.

He was a founder and very active member of the Crofters' Union and chairman of the Kyle of Sutherland branch. He took a deep personal interest in recruiting as many as possible to the cause, chasing up backsliders for their subscriptions when necessary. He was a resolute champion of crofting and the union till the end of his days.

Robin leaves a legacy of a loving family, still involved for another generation in the croft on which he spent so many happy and productive years, admired and respected by all who knew him. His was a long life well lived to the very end.

There can be no greater tribute to one of crofting's finest sons.

Jim McGillivray

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# Walking with cattle

In search of the last drovers of Uist  
by Terry J Williams

**TERRY WILLIAMS WAS** an early supporter of the SCU.

In this new book she looks back at the old practice of droving, now replaced by lorries and auction marts. She meets some of the few remaining folk who remember and were involved, and from their reminiscences and her own research, she weaves together a fascinating account.

Terry's quest started by chance at Dingwall mart and the impressive drover exhibition she found there, the work of the Highland Livestock Heritage Society. With the society's support she took a selection of exhibition material and set off in her camper van to Uist for the North Uist Agricultural Show. A map of the stances and ferry ports was compiled and she followed the cattle routes around the Uists, making contact with many individuals who had been involved in, or remembered, the gathering of the fine island cattle and their progress to the boats which would take them on to their mainland destinations.

Terry recorded the conversations and her transcriptions carry the lilt of island voices very clearly. Her descriptions of the challenges and fun of the gathering and movement of large numbers of cattle beasts are well written and evocative.

Amongst many others, she met SCU/SCF local stalwarts Ena Macdonald and David and

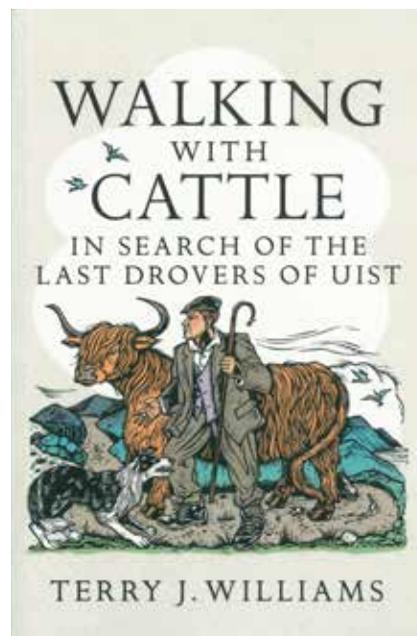
Catherine Muir.

Crofters welcomed Terry into their homes and shared their memories and experiences. Some, like Ena, bred cattle. Others helped with the droves. For yet others these events were part of their childhood tapestry. Terry draws together all the threads of their tales and paints a picture full of images and textures – the misty ascents on the old drove roads; the hardship and camaraderie; the difficulties of loading the animals from pier heads onto the boats and off at the other side of the Minch; the progression to transporting stock on trains and lorries, rather than marches over several days and hundreds of miles.

She goes on to describe the work of the modern auctioneer and the skill involved in getting the best price for crofters' cattle and sheep in the ring, and the commitment of those in the trade.

For readers unfamiliar with this area of Scottish history, the book is a welcome introduction. For the rest of us, Terry Williams offers a reminder (if we need it) of the importance of crofting in producing high-quality breeding stock and the challenges of getting the beasts away to the traditional trysts in Crieff, Falkirk and Stirling. This is a valuable historical record.

ISBN 978-1-78027-488-1  
[www.birlinn.co.uk](http://www.birlinn.co.uk)



## SCF training courses - register your interest

**C**OURSES ARE BOOKING up quickly. If you have a particular interest, email us and we will contact you as soon as a date is released.

### Argyll

Croft woodland management  
24th March 2018  
Venue TBC, Kilmartin Museum, Kilmartin  
Cost: £40 per person

Scything 2-day course:  
19th and 20th May 2018  
Venue TBC, Kilmartin Museum, Kilmartin  
Cost: £80 per person

Permaculture: 26th May 2018  
Venue TBC, Kilmartin Museum, Kilmartin  
Cost: £40 per person

Animal husbandry: 24th June 2018  
Venue TBC, Kilmartin Museum, Kilmartin  
Cost: £40 per person

Local course director Julia Hamilton  
To book a place contact:  
[training@crofting.org](mailto:training@crofting.org) or 01854 612220

### Moray

Practical pigkeeping: Spring 2018  
Venue TBC  
Cost: £40 per person

### Skye and Lochalsh

Our local course director Becky Milne will be running a range of new practical skills courses including poultry husbandry, sheepdogs, lambing and drystone walling for 2018. Get in touch if there is something you would like to happen in your area. We respond to local demand and will try our very best to make it happen.

### Wester Ross

Our local course director Susan MacLean will be running horticulture courses in the near future, as well as sheepdogs, dates TBC. She will be hosting a new course with tutor Graeme Swanson MRCVS from Conanvet.

  
**Scottish Crofting Federation**  
rooted in our communities

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