

Robust regulation essential to free up crofts for young folk

SCF'S young crofters group hosted two sessions to find solutions to the difficulties in getting access to crofts and was inundated with the number of people wanting to participate and the range of ideas that were offered.

"There were no great surprises about the problems we are faced with," said SCF chair Donald Mackinnon, himself a young crofter, "but it was very refreshing to hear people's ideas about how to solve them. We were so overwhelmed with the initial response to the event invitation that we had to run a duplicate session, which was also subscribed

to capacity.

"The problems explored included the very high prices being asked for crofts; lack of access to finance; crofts not being made available even when not being used; inadequacies of crofting law and administration; the obstacles young folk face just trying to stay in their locality, such as lack of affordable housing; and the lack of action on creating new crofts."

These issues have all been identified in the National Development Plan for Crofting – see the article in this edition on page 7. And on page 9 a leading crofting solicitor discusses

...Continued on page 3



SCF Young Crofter Award



HELEN O'Keefe, in Elphin, Sutherland, is the Scottish Crofting Federation Young Crofter of the Year.

Judges representing SCF, The MacRobert Trust and the Crofting Commission made their choice from exceptionally worthy submissions.

SCF chair Donald MacKinnon said, "We had an extremely high calibre of entrants for this round of the SCF Young Crofter Award, which is generously supported by The MacRobert Trust. It is an inspiration to see young folk doing such a very wide variety of activities on their crofts and they all fully deserve to be recognised for their efforts and enterprises."

"The judges certainly found what they were looking for – inspiration, enterprise, commitment and community involvement, in abundance. From the wide range of nominations, all very worthy ambassadors for crofting, we narrowed it down to a shortlist – Adam Veitch from Banavie, Cheryl McIntyre from Skye and Helen O'Keefe from Elphin. But of course there can only be one winner. Helen seems to be some sort of human dynamo!"

In little over three years, Helen has increased a flock of Shetland sheep from six to nearly 100; a portion of the flock are crossed with a Beltex ram; she sells breeding and store lambs, mutton, fleeces and yarn. She produces and sells eggs, fruit and vegetables and set up the phenomenally

...Continued on page 3

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Responsible roaming feature
- Control of dogs on croft land
- Local croft produce feature

- Crofting development plan
- Crofting looks to parties' manifestos

- Donald's hortiblog

... and much more

Message from the new chair...

Donald MacKinnon



I WOULD like to begin by thanking my predecessor, Yvonne White, who has done a tremendous job of leading SCF over the past two years.

It is a daunting task to be taking

over from Yvonne, but it is reassuring to know that I am supported by an excellent staff team, a board of committed volunteer directors and our council of knowledgeable advisers.

We began the year by officially leaving the EU. Thankfully, the last-minute deal cobbled together at Christmas-time prevented a potentially disastrous no-deal exit which could have seen the lamb market collapse. In fact we are currently seeing consistently strong prices for sheep and cattle across the UK.

It is good to see store lamb buyers rewarded for their gamble in the back end and we look forward to welcoming them back to marts across the Highlands and Islands later in the year. How long these prices will be sustained is anyone's guess, but there is no doubt that all exports to the EU are facing increased red tape. Whether or not this will impact the lamb price in the long term is yet to be seen.

The climate emergency and biodiversity crisis are, quite rightly, dominating the political agenda at the moment. It is certain that new agricultural support schemes will reflect this. Crofters have much to be commended for on both our climate credentials and being responsible for maintaining so much biodiversity in the areas we manage.

However, we too have to play our part in helping reach the Scottish Government's ambitious targets. While change of this scale is always going to be challenging, I believe that reform of agricultural support presents an opportunity to get things right for crofting.

It was disappointing that crofting law reform was not taken forward as promised in this parliamentary session. Time and circumstances seemed to be against the process. It is essential that this is prioritised by the next Scottish Government and that the work restarts early in the next parliament. Dealing with the many technical problems identified by the crofting law sump has to be the number one priority, but it is also important that we think radically about how we can make the law work better for crofters and crofting.

With so much change and uncertainty on the horizon it is essential that crofting has SCF representatives fighting our corner.

Best of luck to everyone calving and lambing in the coming weeks and months, let's hope the weather is kind.

How can crofting help address the climate emergency?

THE SCOTTISH Government, along with other governments around the world, has made legally binding commitments to substantially reduce Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions.

We cannot escape the fact that the agricultural sector produces a relatively large proportion of Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions, although it is certainly far from the largest source. If we are to meet our targets, and we must, then agriculture, including crofting, will have to contribute.

Cabinet secretary Fergus Ewing has set up a series of industry-led climate groups, primarily made up of crofters and farmers. The groups relevant to most crofters are the Suckler Beef Group and the Hill, Upland and Crofting Group (HUCG). The Suckler Beef Group has already reported and a pilot scheme is currently being developed. HUCG met for the first time in January and has been tasked with identifying practical measures that the sector can take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance biodiversity.

What is clear from the beef suckler report and from the initial meetings of HUCG is that support payments in the future will be conditional on producers undertaking certain minimum requirements. What these requirements will be is still to be decided but we can expect carbon audits to feature, possibly mandatory animal health plans and some form of soil analysis.

There is a danger that this approach could put a disproportionately high financial and administrative burden on smaller producers. It is essential that, while conditions are inevitable, they must be useful, affordable and practically achievable for crofters.



© Carl Jorgensen on unsplash

Improving efficiency through better grassland management, optimising animal health and selective breeding can all contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The other obvious benefit of improving efficiency is reduced costs and, hopefully, increased profitability. Improving efficiency does not mean intensification. Extensive livestock rearing can be one of the most efficient types of agricultural production.

Biodiversity cannot be ignored. Pilot studies currently being carried out on results-based schemes provide a blueprint for how a replacement to the agri-environment scheme climate might look. Livestock production is essential to maintaining many of our most

important habitats.

Peatland restoration and tree planting also have massive potential to sequester CO₂. With much of our peatland in a degraded state and actively releasing CO₂, we cannot afford not to do what we can to restore these areas. As a large proportion of Scotland's peatland is located on common grazings, crofters are critical to achieving this. Crofters have also been leading the way on sustainable forestry planting and in particular incorporating trees within agricultural production.

The Hill, Upland and Crofting Group is expected to report at the end of March. Donald MacKinnon sits on this group. If you have any thoughts on this subject please email donaldarnol@crofting.org.

Robust regulation essential to free up crofts for young folk

...Continued from page 1

finance issues with croft acquisition.

Donald continued, "A common theme in the sessions was the recognition that many of these issues can be addressed by having a robust system of regulation and a well-resourced regulator, with responsibility for crofting development. If croft occupiers are held to account to the statutory conditions of having a croft, it will limit how many crofts are sold off as second home sites; it will help to free up unused crofts; and more available crofts will bring prices down.

"We want to see the Commission out in our communities, talking to people, working with crofters to solve this problem. There were other suggestions which we will publicise, but this issue of crofting being regulated effectively was absolutely central. We will continue to work with the Crofting Commission to help make this happen and to call on the Scottish Government to resource the Commission to do its job."

Donald concluded, "It is obvious that crofting is stagnating, which is heart-breaking. A radical and uniquely democratic system of land tenure, that is a model admired literally the world over, is not realising its potential. It is widely recognised that the number one priority for the survival of crofting is to reinvigorate succession – get crofts back into work and make crofts available to people who will croft.

"The huge response to our call to discuss this demonstrates how strongly people feel about it. Things have to change. We who do care about crofting must up the ante on lobbying those who have the gift to make this happen – politicians, government, agencies and crofters. The message is clear – don't ignore this any longer; we need action."



© Martin Benson

SCF Young Crofter Award

...Continued from page 1

successful online food hub The Green Bowl, recently featured on BBC Alba, offering meat, vegetables and fruit from a range of growers from Elphin to Ullapool, Coigach and Assynt.

She also runs the Elphin Tea Rooms, a popular tourist stop-off, in which she offers croft produce and home-baking. She serves the township as grazings clerk and has been very active in developing projects for various schemes. Helen is known for her participation in training events, the Women in Crofting network and is a Soil Association Scottish Farmer Ambassador. And there is more ...

Chris Hockley, CEO at The MacRobert Trust, said, "The MacRobert Trust is really pleased to continue to support the award for Young Crofter of the Year. We are always keen to help and support young people in agriculture helping themselves

and their community through dedication, hard work and enterprise, inspiring others by their efforts as they realise their own goals. This award epitomises all those attributes in a sector so very close to the MacRobert's heart."

Convener of the Crofting Commission, Rod Mackenzie, said, "It is extremely encouraging that there is so much enthusiasm, energy and innovation from the young crofters who were nominated for this award. The Crofting Commission acknowledges the demand from young people who wish to occupy a croft and make a contribution to the sustainability of local communities, local food networks and population retention, especially in remote areas of the crofting counties."

On being notified of her win Helen said, "I am absolutely delighted to receive this award. It's a real honour because I know there are a lot of other

young crofters doing incredible things out there. It's great that SCF has this award to showcase the work of young crofters, and maybe help inspire other young people to pursue crofting as a career. Thank you to the judges for choosing me for this honour, and thank you to my township. I couldn't have achieved this award without their help and support – but that's part of what crofting's about, isn't it!"

Chris Hockley added, "I know the competition was tight but I am particularly delighted that Helen O'Keefe has won the award. She has such energy and determination and has achieved so much in her short time in crofting – a truly worthy winner. Many, many congratulations."

You can read more about The Green Bowl in our local food feature on page 14.

RESPONSIBLE ROAMING

There is no right to roam

THERE HAS long been a myth that people have the right to roam in Scotland. This is not correct. People have the right to responsible access.

Problems caused by visitors taking access on the land are increasing all over Scotland, especially since lockdown and within driving distance of centres of population. It is becoming more of a problem in the remoter crofting areas, places of scenic beauty, exacerbated by the relentless promotion of tourist hot-spots such as the North Coast 500 and Skye's Fairy Pools – just about anywhere in the crofting areas in fact – see the following report on the Shetland situation by Laurie Goodlad. There have been myriad reports of crofters being abused for asking campers and walkers to take responsibility for their actions, to take their litter home, to keep their dog on a lead as sheep are lambing and so on.

NatureScot, who are accountable for the access code, point out that the code is very clear about this; and that littering, damage, stock-worrying and verbal abuse are all criminal offences – so it is a police matter, not a failing of the access code. The code may be clear (this is questionable) but people are unaware of it or

ignore it. Furthermore, the shortage of police cover in crofting areas, and the time taken to respond to calls for help in remote places, or the impossibility of tracing someone who has since left, make it an insurmountable task.

Whilst visitors are very welcome, the associated problems are increasing. There have been far too many reports of dogs worrying, wounding and killing livestock, damage to croft fences and gates, inappropriate parking and abandoned rubbish. It is not uncommon to find human waste of all kinds in parking spaces, on verges and where someone wild-camped on croft land. And it is not uncommon for crofters to get verbal abuse for asking the culprit to desist.

Facilities for travellers are desperately short and have not kept up with the promotion of tourist destinations. If there are bins, toilets, loo-emptying tanks etc available, most people will use them. It is essential that local authorities use the increase in tourism support in the recent budget (doubling the rural tourism infrastructure fund, helping tourist destinations and

local communities make improvements to cope with increased visitors) to put in place the services and infrastructure needed.

There also needs to be a concerted effort to educate – schools, tourism promoters, publications, signage, all working together to educate visitors.

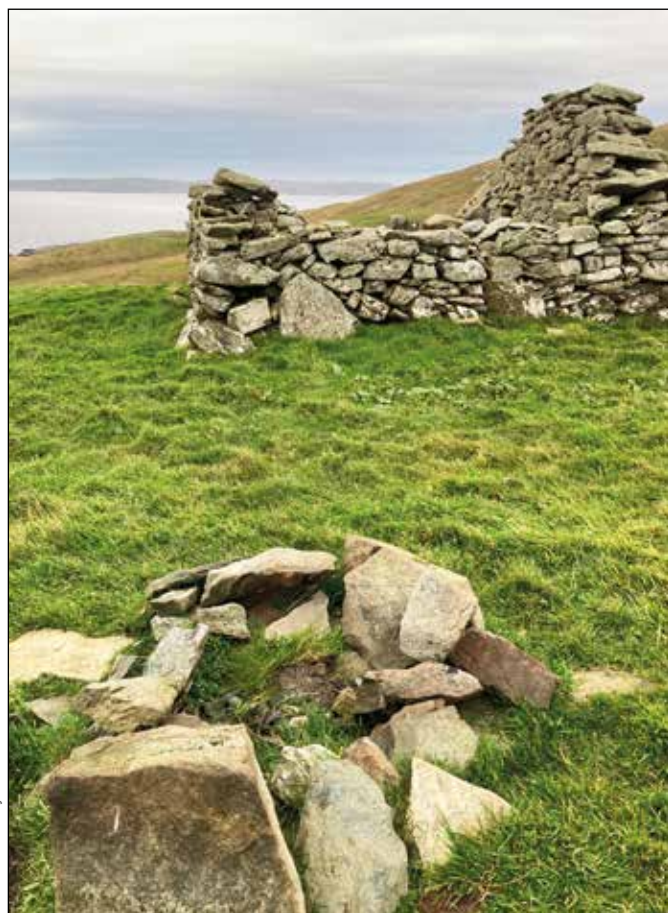
What you can do:

- Put up signs.
- Report **every** incident to the police.
- Take photos and send them to the police.
- Attend your local access forum.
- Let SCF know.



© Mitch Hodge on unsplash

Understanding and respecting



© David Murray

A fire pit made using stones from historic buildings at Fethaland

This article by Laurie Goodlad was first published in the Shetland Times. We are reproducing it at the request of our members in Shetland, shortened to fit available space.

PEOPLE are being urged to get to know the Scottish Outdoor Access Code before heading into the countryside, after what has been described as “a crazy summer” last year by one Shetland crofter.

Shetland's top beauty spots saw more traffic as locals, lifted from lockdown, took the opportunity to visit scenic areas. Several crofters were left despairing after a summer of many incidences where visitors did not adhere to the code. Crofters across Shetland are seeing a serious reduction in the numbers of indigenous and migratory nesting birds which, they say, is a direct result of increased footfall and, more specifically, dogs disrupting wildlife and livestock.

Increasing visitor numbers also affected how crofters manage their land, with many reporting that they had to reduce numbers of grazing livestock due to increasing numbers of sheep driven off the cliffs and away from their usual pastures, with dogs allowed to run off their leads.

Disregarded signs and polite

notices, blocked access tracks and sheds show a lack of understanding and blatant lack of respect. One crofter reported that 90% of people ignored the signs put in place for the safety of cattle – and visitors – and went into fields regardless. With signs ignored, silage parks trampled and reports of stolen pallets to make fires, crofters are at their wits' end.

Another has recently padlocked his gate, but allows permission if people get in touch directly and pay a fee to help with upkeep of a private track. He says there needs to be a shift of balance from folk using worked land as a playground to realising that it's not an empty landscape.

Many people have no idea what the land is used for. With people traipsing through crops, silage fields and getting too close to livestock with young, crofters said the situation was becoming dangerous.

People need to be educated on how to behave in the outdoors and this should start in a formal setting, in primary school. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that we look after nature. The overriding message is that our countryside is not a playground; it's a habitat, it's a workplace and it is incredibly fragile and susceptible to change.

A visitor's attempt to photograph

RESPONSIBLE ROAMING

Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill



DOG ATTACKS cause suffering to animals, cost crofters and farmers money and cause them distress.

This member's bill was introduced by Emma Harper MSP, who believes the current law is out of date and isn't working effectively – which most crofters, farmers and SCF wholeheartedly agree with. It amends the existing law on what is called livestock worrying, which is where a dog chases, attacks or kills livestock.

The bill

- increases the maximum penalty to a fine of £5,000 or imprisonment for six months;
- allows the courts to ban a convicted person from owning a dog or allowing the dog to go on agricultural land;
- gives the police greater powers to investigate and enforce livestock worrying offences, including going onto land to identify a dog, seize it and collect evidence from it;
- allows other organisations to be given similar powers;

- extends the livestock worrying offence to cover additional types of farmed animal. You can find out more in the document prepared on behalf of Emma Harper MSP, which explains the bill.

Emma hopes that making these changes to the law will encourage people to keep their dogs under control. Where attacks do occur, she hopes the bill will make it easier for them to be investigated and the people responsible to be punished.

You can learn more online or by writing to Emma. She wants to hear from you.

All incidents of stock worrying should be immediately reported to Police Scotland by phoning 101. Take photos and provide this evidence to the police.

the outdoors

a bird's nest may be all it takes to prevent a mother returning to a nest. The fire that you light on the cliff-top not only spoils the area for

others, but may damage the native flora that tentatively clings to the thin soils.



© Laurie Goodlad

Always ensure that you avoid walking in cultivated fields - seek an alternative route

An idea worth investigating

SAC senior consultant Janette Sutherland reports

NATURAL capital is the world's stock of natural resources – for example, soils, water, air and all living organisms.

Along with SRUC colleagues, I am working on a new project called *Scotland's Rural Tourism Economy post Covid19: A Natural Capital Approach*. The background to the project, funded from the Scottish Funding Council's University Innovation Fund, is that the Highlands and Islands have two main enterprises which rely on our abundant natural capital – agriculture and tourism. These can be complementary, but in high-density tourism hot spots there can be considerable conflict.

This project aims to bring crofting, tourism and education together to look for innovative solutions. For this article, I'm focusing on one of the many facets of the project. SAC Consulting is working on Skye's natural capital with SkyeConnect, the destination management organisation. We are partnering with SCF, NFUS, our local NatureScot office and The European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism.

We believe there would be benefit in setting up a Skye Foundation. This body could tell visitors the stories of the landscapes and the people who work in them, to enrich their experience on Skye. It would use innovative methods to seek donations from visitors, for example, using QR codes for online donations.

These donations could then be used to help support and finance crofters, common grazings, farmers and community groups in natural capital management. We submitted a funding bid to NatureScot for a feasibility study, which we are delighted to say has been successful.

We look forward to sharing our findings with you in the summer edition of *The Crofter*.



For more info
contact Maree
on 07787125219
or info@polycrub.co.uk
www.polycrub.co.uk



inksters



As featured on BBC Alba,
Reporting Scotland and
Sunday Politics Scotland

01599 230 300
crofting@inksters.com

croftinglaw.com
inksters.com

ALLANS OF GILLOCK LTD



GILLOCK MAINS, GILLOCK, WICK, CAITHNESS, KW1 5UR
TEL: 01955 661211

YOUR LOCAL BUILDERS & AGRICULTURAL MERCHANTS



Stockists of

FENCING MATERIALS & GATES SHEEP & CATTLE HANDLING & FEEDING EQUIPMENT

CAITHNESS
Tel: 01955 661211
Fax: 01955 661244
info@allans.co.uk

ORKNEY
Tel: 01856 761594
Fax: 01856 761709
orkney@allans.co.uk

SHETLAND
Tel: 01950 460417
Fax: 01950 460013
shetland@allans.co.uk

INVERNESS
Tel: 01463 713270
Fax: 01463 713393
inverness@allans.co.uk

Tried, Tested and Approved



keder
greenhouses

Superior growing
environment for the
serious gardener

Resistant against extreme
weather conditions



4m x 10m

'10 YEAR GUARANTEE AGAINST UV DEGRADATION'

Keder Greenhouses Limited
Newtown, Offenham, Evesham,
Worcestershire WR11 8RZ
t: +44 (0) 1386 49094
sales@kedergreenhouse.co.uk

www.kedergreenhouse.co.uk

A range of
sizes available
to suit any croft

@KederGreenhouse

National Development Plan for Crofting

IN SCOTLAND'S Programme for Government, published in September 2016, it was made clear that the Scottish Government would engage with crofting stakeholders in drafting a National Development Plan for Crofting (NDPC).

Engagement with stakeholders has continued through its crofting stakeholder forum, where its members have been considering what recommendations they wish to make to the Scottish Government for inclusion in a National Development Plan for Crofting. The top priorities identified by the forum are:

1. Simplify crofting legislation

Current crofting legislation is overly complicated and outdated, requiring reform to make it more understandable and workable in practice.

2. New entrants

Work is required urgently to enable new entrants to get access to crofts by making unused crofts available and creating new crofts.

3. Increase affordable housing

Through a meaningful grant and loan system, do more to help new entrants and

crofters get access to affordable housing in rural and island communities.

4. Development of crofting

Fund a lead body on crofting development.

5. Financial incentives

Ensure current and future funding policies have a positive impact on crofting.

6. Common grazings

Common grazings are a huge potential resource for crofting communities, which need effective management to fully realise their economic potential.

The plan, as it currently stands, contains the following sections:

- The Crofting Commission's role in the development of crofting;
- Commission job creation and partnership working;
- environment and biodiversity;
- housing;
- signposting;
- broadband infrastructure;
- local food networks.

Work is also ongoing on a number of other sections of the plan, such as:

- financial incentives, which will cover the wide range of grants and support available to crofters;
- a wildlife section – that will cover, deer, geese, sea eagles and ravens;
- digital skills;
- legislation;
- carbon credits.

A focus group has been looking at how we can widen the scope of CAGS, such as:

- widening the eligibility criteria which will enable crofters who are involved in non-agricultural activities to apply;
- extending eligible works currently supported under the scheme;
- introducing standard costs;
- introducing advanced payments.

The plan will also contain a number of case studies and testimonials from crofters, which will illustrate what is currently being achieved by crofters and common grazings; and also to capture the views of the people the publication targets.

Work continues on the NDPC and the intention is to have it published by the end of the current government session.

Training for grazings committees

PRIOR TO the current health situation, the Crofting Commission, with the assistance of the Farm Advisory Service (FAS), were traveling to deliver workshops in many locations throughout the crofting counties.

These workshops focused on the proper management of common grazings, through properly appointed grazing committees, effective and up-to-date regulations and guidance on good practice. However, Covid restrictions meant it was impossible to carry on meeting crofters and delivering training events face to face in village halls.

Not to be thwarted, the Commission wished to explore the training needs of grazings committees and gauge the interest in receiving training via online methods. We conducted a survey of those grazings clerks who we had email contact details for and received 127 responses, which highlighted several issues.

The main issue highlighted was the difficulty for grazings committees and shareholders to meet face to face to discuss and agree the ongoing management of the common grazings, with the present restrictions in place. The other issue raised was the difficulty of managing differences of opinion within crofting communities.



Commissioner Mairi Mackenzie and convener Rod Mackenzie

In response to this, the Commission and FAS teamed up once again to deliver several online training sessions, firstly focusing on the use of the Zoom platform. The aim of these sessions was to demonstrate setting up and hosting online meetings, to provide an option for committees to meet whilst restrictions are in place. Should anybody be interested, this training event was recorded and is available by contacting the Crofting

Commission's grazings section, grazings@crofting.gov.scot.

To assist with the issue of managing differences of opinions, the Commission and FAS enlisted the services of The Mediation Partnership, who are specialists in this topic and are based in Aberdeen.

Four online workshops in March looked at disputes and disagreements, how they escalate and the skills and techniques to effectively manage and resolve these

situations for everyone involved.

If you feel you could benefit from any of the training please let us know and if there is sufficient interest, we will endeavour to run further courses later in the year. We hope it won't be too long before we can meet you again face to face to deliver them.

www.fas.scot
www.crofting.scotland.gov.uk
 The Grazings Team, Crofting Commission

CAMUS
CONSULTING



Experienced, solution-focused and cost effective crofting law advice.

Eilidh has a new business address at the Dingwall Auction Mart and retains her capacity to take on work all over the Crofting Counties.

Eilidh Ross

Crofting Law Consultant

eilidh@camus.scot | Tel. 07876 513404

www.camus.scot

c/o Auction Mart, Humberston, Bailechaul Road,
Dingwall, Ross-shire IV15 9TP



Ian Blackford MP

**Member of Parliament for
Ross, Skye & Lochaber**

Future Surgery dates will be advertised in the local press

Tel: 01349 866397

Email: ian.blackford.mp@parliament.uk

Twitter: @IBlackfordSNPMP

Facebook: facebook.com/IanBlackford.SNP

Web: <http://ianblackford.scot>

29 High Street

Dingwall

IV15 9RU



GREETING CARDS

Pack of 10 - £5 + P&P



For all your design and
printing needs, call on
strath  print

*Ask us today for
a free quote*

Broadford, Isle of Skye, IV49 9AP

Tel: 01471 822 555

www.strathprint.co.uk

Proud to print *The Crofter*



Angus B MacNeil MP

Na h-Eileanan an Iar

**Available for surgeries
All enquiries welcome**

Constituency Office 31 Bayhead Street, Stornoway
Isle of Lewis HS1 2DU

Telephone 01851 702272

E-Mail angus.macneil.mp@parliament.uk

Lending for croft purchase and development

Solicitor Brian Inkster reflects on a common problem for those needing to obtain finance for a croft purchase.

RECENTLY the government announced that the latest round of funding for the Croft House Grant Scheme (CHGS) saw grants worth £289,920 awarded to nine crofters.

This very good scheme has helped many crofters over the years. Prior to 2007 a previous scheme included a loan element. That additional financial assistance was very beneficial for crofters when it is not possible to obtain secured lending on croft land. The Scottish government should consider reintroducing it.

The issue of crofting mortgages has been debated for some considerable time without seeing the light of day. The Scottish Government looked at this in the consultation draft of the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Bill back in 2009. By the time the bill was introduced to the Scottish Parliament, gone completely from it was the proposal to provide crofters with the option of using their tenancy as security for a loan.

The policy memorandum that accompanied the bill stated that “although the committee of Scottish Clearing Bankers indicated that they were satisfied that the proposals provided a sufficient framework for lending, other responses to the consultation indicated that crofters would prefer to continue with current arrangements, where they decroft a house site in order to access loan finance. As a result, this proposal has been dropped from the bill.”

I commented at the time that I was unsure of the logic in this, given that it perhaps contradicted the provisions in the bill that sought to prevent decrofting in respect of speculation of croft land. I said that it did not address the situation of young crofters wishing to raise finance to actually purchase a croft, as opposed to a house site on a croft. I asked what would have been the harm of leaving these provisions in the bill and giving crofters the option of granting securities with or without decrofting?

In recent years crofting mortgages were looked at again as part of plans for further crofting law reform with, it appeared, possibly less resistance this time around to it being included in a new bill. Unfortunately, the Scottish Government put a halt on crofting law reform due to the pressures of Brexit. It will be into a new parliamentary term, after the elections in May, before we might see crofting law reform, including crofting mortgages, back on the Scottish Government's agenda.



© Martin Benson

SCF proposals for party manifestos

SCOTTISH Parliament elections take place on 6 May. The Scottish Government controls most crofting matters, so these elections are important to us all.

SCF sends its proposals to all the parties, so they can include our points in their manifestos. Members can discuss these proposals with candidates – in online hustings and if they ever get as far as your doorstep. Below are a mixture of crofting-specific measures, agriculture/trade issues and general concerns affecting everybody in the crofting counties, in no particular order.

Crofting legislation must be updated. We need to see the National Development Plan for Crofting agreed and implemented. The Crofting Commission has to be resourced to handle its day-to-day regulatory work promptly and use its regulatory powers to bring vacant and derelict crofts back into use. This issue comes up time and time again at our meetings.

Agricultural support payments have to be maintained in the short term. In the longer term, new support systems will be geared to climate change and should be accessible to small units. Common grazings must not be an afterthought.

Biodiversity, the environment and carbon capture are important, as are food production and population retention. If we are to reduce carbon emissions by becoming more efficient, advisory services should be beefed up and geared to crofts, not just bigger farms.

A less favoured areas support scheme replacement must target disadvantaged areas more effectively. The crofting agricultural grant

scheme budget must be increased. Schemes to reduce the impact of geese, sea eagles and deer require more thought – and funding.

Post-Brexit trade deals should not lower standards and undercut home producers. Support schemes must be in place in case sheep prices collapse if export markets are lost. It is essential to build up the home market and to keep supply chains short and accessible to small producers – local abattoirs, a croft produce mark etc. The gaps in the Brexit trade deal need to be plugged for seed potatoes and export of breeding animals.

Lack of affordable housing affects not just crofters, so the croft house scheme requires more funds, as it is an effective way of easing the pressure. It should have a loan element. Planning needs to be more sympathetic and the proliferation of second homes and holiday lets must be controlled.

Land reform must move faster. Too much land is in the control of too few people who have a disproportionate influence. The ability to create crofts on private land alongside a push for more crofts on publicly-owned land is essential.

Over-tourism is having a damaging effect in some areas – Skye and the North Coast 500 are examples. Better infrastructure to support the tourism boom is necessary: dual-track roads, good ferry services, pot-holes filled in, adequate toilet provision, fast broadband everywhere. Tourists and their dogs must be educated in responsible access.

It sounds a lot, but now is the time to ask, when votes are up for grabs and politicians prepared to listen. Do vote – whatever your political persuasion.

Crofts as assets for payment of care

ASSESSING the value of croft tenancies, with a view to classifying them as an asset that can be realised to contribute to the costs of caring for the tenant, is an important and controversial issue which was discussed in the Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group on Crofting recently.

Local authorities have, for a long time, assessed the value of a person's assets if that person is in need of being taken into care – with the intention that the assets can be sold and proceeds used to pay for the care-home costs. This applies to everyone, crofters included. Assets may include cash, investments, valuables, buildings, land and so on.

A relatively new thing specific to crofting is that local authorities are considering a croft tenancy to be an asset which may be valued and the value realised, even though the land is actually owned by someone other than the tenant. This is an unusual situation and contentious, as annual

leases are not valued as an asset in any other situation that we know of.

But crofting tenure is unique. It is very unusual for tenants to have the right to buy or assign their tenancy – especially outwith the family, which is what makes it a saleable commodity. And being a regulated system, a potential incoming tenant can be blocked by the Crofting Commission or forced to abide by certain conditions. This is why banks will not accept croft land as security for a loan.

The justification proffered by the local authorities is that croft tenancies are sold on the open market and therefore have a value – making them an asset like any other which, should the crofter need to go into care, can be valued and sold if necessary to raise money to pay for the care.

This is countered with the argument that a tenanted croft does not belong to the crofter and the lease of the croft is solely between the landlord and the tenant and it is, therefore, inappropriate for a third party to interfere in this arrangement in

any way – and if banks will not accept croft land as security then it is not really an asset.

Many argue that if croft land was regulated more strictly, it would take it away from the market – and that selling crofts and tenancies simply goes against what crofting is about. They assert that selling crofts, tenanted or owned, on an open market is a fundamental change to this unique system of regulated land tenure that is not welcome.

Should the right to buy be removed? Should the right to assign outwith the family be removed? Perhaps the answer is in the creation of new crofts that are tenanted only?

The debate will undoubtedly continue. Meanwhile SCF reminds members that succession planning is vital. Have your assignation in place before it becomes an issue, or you could be left with what is deemed an asset that will be assessed. Trying to pass it on too late will be seen as avoidance.

New research to improve crofters' and farmers' mental health



© SRUC

NEW RESEARCH explores interventions to best support the mental health and wellbeing of people in crofting and farming communities.

Led by the University of Stirling and Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), the study explores crofters' and farmers' views, up-take and acceptability of two possible interventions.

One will deliver emotional and social support – including financial advice – and the other will be an online psychological therapy specifically developed for the farming and crofting community.

Four-fifths of farmers under the

age of 40 consider mental health the biggest hidden problem facing the agricultural community. Depression is increasing and suicide rates are among the highest in any occupational group. It is currently estimated that one agricultural worker per week takes their own life.

Margaret Maxwell, professor of health services and mental health research at the University of Stirling, said: "Underlying reasons for poor mental health among farming and crofting communities lie in the unique social, environmental and economic challenges of rural food production. Intervention targeted towards helping farmers and

crofters cope with these issues may be more acceptable and beneficial.

"Farmers are more likely to turn to their own communities for support than to health or social work authorities, with many preferring advice from colleagues such as vets or telephone or on-line resources. However, there is no knowledge of preferences and acceptability or up-take of remote interventions and how these can best be signposted."

Dr Kate Stephen, behavioural scientist at SRUC, said: "There are always challenges in this sector and farmers and crofters are used to having to cope, often by themselves.

At times it can feel overwhelming. It's not clear what support is available and it's not always easy to ask for help. This project looks at what types of support farmers and crofters could benefit from and how it could be adapted to suit them best. We're interested in the wider crofting and farming communities, farm workers and family members, whether the holding is large or small.

"We're thinking about how to get in early, to prevent things getting worse, how to help people recognise when they are struggling in themselves and what tools help them to turn things around. We'd also like to hear from people from farming and crofting communities who understand what it feels like to struggle. We'd like to include people who don't usually ask for help."

The study will be conducted in the Highland area and the Shetland Islands. Researchers are looking for volunteers to take part in early-stage interviews and focus groups. This will be followed by a pilot study of the interventions, to recruit 40 members of the farming and crofting community.

The research is being funded by the Chief Scientist Office (part of the Scottish Government Health Directorates) and supported by partners including the Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RSABI), Support in Mind Scotland, The National Rural Mental Health Forum and NHS Highland.

If you are interested in taking part, or would like more information, email farmingminds@sruc.ac.uk or visit www.sruc.ac.uk/farmingminds.

LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

ONE OF the few positives of movement restrictions over the past year has been the greatly increased interest in, and appreciation of, locally-produced food and short supply chains.

Crofting has a lead role in local food production and this feature showcases how many of our members are growing and selling a huge and impressive range of meat, vegetables, fruit, honey, baked goods, preserves and more. Crafts are equally popular, particularly to tourists when they can return.

Customers are amazed at the difference in taste and quality of croft-grown produce compared to what they find on supermarket shelves. Hotels and restaurants also impress their guests when their menus offer local meat, vegetables and fruit. Selling locally adds premium added value for all involved.

There are many obstacles, not least our weather and geographic conditions. But one of the key necessities to sustain and strengthen local meat sales is the need for more well-placed small-scale abattoirs. Mull slaughterhouse is an example. Without this vital infrastructure, costs and logistical challenges are greatly increased.

The difficulties in establishing and keeping small abattoirs functioning are well known. We have highlighted these in previous issues of *The Crofter* and in this issue. SCF continues to lobby for increased abattoir provision.



© LHHP

Donald's hortiblog



LOCAL FOOD – lots of people say they want it.

The extraordinary circumstances of lockdown seem to have renewed the desire to consume and produce more of it. In our part of Skye, the evidence is in the recent proliferation of polytunnels, polycrubs and Keder houses and crofter-growers scaling up to supply vegetable boxes to individual customers as well as serving the hotel and restaurant trade when it reopens.

Well over twenty years ago we stood with other growers behind a stall in Point Street, Stornoway, on a Saturday morning, usually with water from the leaking rones of the town hall running down our necks. This was the start of a hugely successful project that continues today. Lewis and Harris Horticultural Producers is thriving all these years later and you can read about them elsewhere in this issue.

I wrote last time about the support we had last year from our local shops, both as suppliers and as customers. It put me in mind of away back, convincing a shopkeeper to take our produce on a sale or return basis. She was a bit sceptical, but went along with us. In fact it turned out to be all sales and no returns, so everyone gained.

So how can crofting horticulturists add to their income through local produce? The term sometimes overused is niche markets. Put simply, that means giving

the customer something they can't otherwise get.

We all know the disappointment of a supermarket tomato, even in high summer. So given a protected growing space, we can fill that particular niche by selecting some of the superb varieties that never get anywhere near mass production.

Another opportunity for those with covered growing space is early potatoes – as early as possible, planted in February and ready in May. It's important to research varieties that are suitable and acceptable to local tastes.

Then consider berries. A grower in Skye has been very successful with blueberries outside, but the conditions required – acidic soil, sheltered, damp but free-draining – are rare in the crofting areas. So what about the loganberry, tayberry or tummelberry? You don't find these in the supermarket. There are the cultivated varieties of bramble, too.

Finally, to go organic or not? Certification is expensive for the small producer. Fresh and local seems an equally good selling point. We have always described our produce as free from pesticides and artificial fertilisers. This is a simple statement of fact and most of our customers know us well enough to accept it.

The picture shows our wee hut at the croft gate. It didn't open last year and this year we'll have to wait and see.

LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

Working together to create a better food system for all

FOR FIVE Mondays between January and February, over 90 people from across the country gathered online for the Highland Good Food Conference, to collaboratively re-imagine a local food system that is better for the planet, people and producers.

Across the five days there was a diverse range of provocations: from inspiring local, innovative farmers passionate about regenerative agriculture to an NHS doctor detailing the nutritional crisis we face; and from a soil carbon scientist to the chair of Scotland Food and Drink. These provocations contributed to enriching discussions covering topics such as improving food equality, the power of communities, how to produce food more sustainably and ways to finance a local food system.

During the conference delegates formed 11 action groups, each focusing on a different aspect of the food system, from seed saving to lobbying policy. These groups have come up with key actions and are developing ways that they can contribute to achieving this fairer food system as we move forward.

Some groups' aims and action plans inevitably overlap with work happening elsewhere in the Highlands and across Scotland, including that of the SCF.

For example, one group is creating a Highland Growers Network for producers who have a shared belief in regenerative agriculture. One of their aims is to provide support for existing producers, as well as new entrants, and help the



transition to agro-ecological practices.

Another group plans to start a producer-owned food hub, with production facilities such as a butchery attached, to shorten supply chains and make local communities more resilient.

It is crucial that we identify areas where our work overlaps and collaborate, not only across organisations, but cross-sector. By coming together our voices become louder, our knowledge and resources expand and our ability to achieve this meaningful change becomes a reality.

The end of the Highland Good Food Conference marks the end of Phase 2 of the Highland Good Food Conversation. We will soon begin Phase 3, where we will be taking action to make the food system in the Highlands better for all.

If you would like to join us, either as an individual or as part of an organisation, or to find out more, please get in touch on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, visit the Highland Good Food Conversation website or send us an email on hello@highlandgoodfood.scot.

Lewis and Harris Horticultural Producers



Susanne Erbida on her local producers' market

BEING ABLE to sell your own produce can be very rewarding.

Some crofters and allotment holders in the Western Isles have been doing this through a weekly market stall in the centre of Stornoway for many years now. The allotments, in the Lews Castle grounds in Stornoway, have flourished in recent years from just a few used plots to having a waiting list.

There used to be a weekly market stall with locally-grown produce in Tarbert, Harris. However it is notoriously difficult to maintain a regular volunteer basis to man the stall and now only the market stall in Stornoway remains. In order to sell at the market one must be a LHHP member, paying a yearly membership fee to Lewis and Harris Horticultural Producers (LHHP). In turn you can sell your produce at the market.

LHHP takes a percentage of the proceeds as commission, which is used to upkeep the trailer, pay for insurance and so on. Anything that is produced on the

island may be sold – plants, vegetables, fruit, flowers, locally-made crafts, eggs etc. When asked by a customer, we can always tell exactly where everything was grown and by whom. In spring plants are most popular, whereas later in the year spuds are the preference. In the past LHHP also ran produce and flower competitions and intends to do so again this summer.

Running the market stall in bad weather can be challenging, but a loyal customer base makes it worthwhile. Sometimes customers come back the next week telling us how fantastic this vegetable or that fruit tasted, as they only ever had the supermarket versions before. Many come for horticultural advice, asking how to plant trees in our difficult climate, what type of vegetable is best to grow, which should be avoided, or how to deal with peaty soil. Older crofters give advice to younger crofters and connections are made.

If you wish to make contact, our email address is lhpsy@gmail.com and our Facebook is <https://www.facebook.com/LHHPsy>.



LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

Food Lochaber

Adam Veitch reports on a community food hub selling produce from multiple crofters and non-crofters in the Lochaber area.

2020 HAS been a strange year for selling local produce, with highs and lows.

But in many ways it has been business as usual for us at Darachbeg Croft, a small croft in Muirshearlich, near Fort William. Local produce continues to be sold with our annual Dexter cattle #beefshare distribution, our croft-based micro-bakery #doughies baking sourdough weekly to order and local-grown vegetables shifting organically from field to plate.

That said, the trading volumes have decreased. As a croft our main point of sale for local produce has not been wholesale through businesses – cafes and restaurants having been heavily impacted by trading restrictions – but rather to individuals. We have been lucky to utilise a strong

local producer platform called Food Lochaber, to connect with these individuals. This is a collective of producers from Lochaber united in a commitment to produce food using organic principles and traditional crofting methods.

Food Lochaber, though, is not just a mark of provenance, but a tangible means of co-ordination and a practical mechanism for selling food locally. It leverages a food-specific trading platform called the Open Food Network UK, which is increasingly being used by communities across Scotland to

sell local food.

Food Lochaber operates a cyclical, virtual farm shop. Each order cycle, we all pool our produce for the benefit of local consumers, giving them one point to order. All producers then pick, bake or cut their respective products and deliver to a central point. This is then combined, packed and made ready for collection. Working collectively and aggregating our produce enables small producers to sell more.

In winter, cycles are run monthly, maintaining a connection with local consumers, but as the season progresses into spring and summer, the cycles increase in frequency to shift the growing abundance of produce. And if there is one thing 2020 has taught us, it's that local food has a strong market – if only we can re-shape patterns of consumption and make it easy to change from just popping to the supermarket.

With 2021 now upon us, like many local producers, we will be eyeing up the coming growing season, with local consumers in mind more than ever. Food Lochaber, and other community food aggregators like it, are starting to help move the needle for the better.



Food Lochaber
west highlands

My micro-scale croft food system and community



At the recent Highland Good Food Conversation conference, writes SCF member Robin Haig, I was invited to give a presentation on the day that posed the question "How do we best keep people at the heart of our food system?"

PART OF what I do on my family's croft is keep hens and sell their eggs to a small number of people through what is now widely known, thanks to Covid-19, as a click-and-collect system.

My customers place orders through a WhatsApp group. I put the freshly-collected eggs in the American-style mailbox at the end of my drive and they collect them when passing. This is a food system, albeit on a micro-scale. I have twenty hens and ten customers and my eggs feed around thirty mouths.

My customers get great-quality eggs from healthy, free-range, organically-fed hens and the satisfaction of buying a product that is well produced and cared for from someone they know, as well as through a super-short supply chain of bum-to-hand-to-box. They often also incorporate exercise into their egg collection, when they walk or cycle to the mailbox.

During this strange year of lockdown and social distancing, that mailbox has enabled friendly transactions and face-to-face interaction high up on a quiet hillside. It has become a place of exchange, not just of eggs for cash, but also gossip, jokes, recycled egg cartons and treats for the dogs. It's where conversations happen, news is shared and people chat and laugh with each other. My apologies for any inconvenience caused to the postie.

If we are to keep people at the heart of our food system, then we need to understand that food – whether that's producing, buying, selling, eating it together or talking about it – is a powerful means of allowing people to share space, interests, friendship and more.

If food in the Highlands is to be good, it's not always about the food itself, but what the food enables. In the case of my eggs, it enables the closeness of community, by bringing people together during a time when that's become difficult. Croft produce has a role to play here. Where many people do a little, by producing food for their community on a micro-scale, they help to bring us all a little closer together.



LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION



The Green Bowl

Elphin and Knockan Growers Group



The Green Bowl

Young crofter of the year Helen O'Keefe shares how she and others in her community sell their produce locally.

THE GREEN Bowl is a collection of residents in Elphin and Knockan (Assynt) who produce food for sale.

Some are crofters, some would like to become crofters and others are very happy just to have their domestic plot of land in this amazing community. The Green Bowl lets us share the time, cost and effort of marketing, selling and distributing our food – and provides access to a market we wouldn't otherwise have.

It will also, hopefully, form the basis of us being able to work more closely together to produce more – sharing things like seeds, information, equipment and labour and value-adding to each other's produce.

Our main products are meat (beef, pork and mutton) and eggs. This is where crofting is such a key part of this enterprise, with the livestock providing the bulk of sales that then support other products, like bread and baked goods. Fruit and vegetables are strictly seasonal, but are an incredibly important part of our offering.

Our customers love being able to buy local vegetables, so it creates a lot more interest in the shop,

boosting sales of other products. All of our horticultural production is small scale, with most being in domestic gardens. Individually these are too small to support a market but, working together, all of these small spaces combine to produce an impressive array of vegetables.

Our main outlet is an online shop, opened in July 2020 and hosted by Open Food Network. Customers order during the week for home delivery every Friday over a 17-mile range. Home delivery is an essential part of our success and another prime example of why working together is so important.

Our main customer base is Ullapool, 15 miles away. It would be difficult (and not time, cost or fuel-efficient) for our customers to come to Elphin each week. It would not be viable for each of the Green Bowl producers to deliver to Ullapool individually. Working together, delivering makes sense and makes it much easier for our customers to buy from us.

The idea for the Green Bowl started with a farm shop in the Elphin Tearooms and this will open again when Covid restrictions allow. However, the online shop will remain our priority. It has been incredible, this past year, to be able to sell our own food to our own communities and this is definitely going to remain our focus.



Helen (left) and her friend Tessa on the croft



LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

Aithsetter croft, cafe and farm shop



SCF member Hazel MacKenzie describes her award-winning farm shop and café in Shetland.

OUR FAMILY have been working the croft at Aithsetter (or Aister as locals call it) for around 500 years.

Our produce is used in our café and we take pride in getting it to that stage. When our own produce isn't available we source excellent quality produce from like-minded crofters, growers and locals. As well as in the café, our own meats are always on sale in the farm shop.

We have a variety of cattle breeds: Aberdeen Angus, Saler,

Simmental, Belted Galloway and Charolais. We rear our calves until about two years old for a richer fuller flavour. Shetland has quite a short growing season (90 -100 days) so we winter the cattle inside for seven months of the year. We grow many acres of silage plus meadow hay, Shetland kale and neeps to feed them. They also have bagged cereals of barley and wheat, which is brought out to the croft.

Our weaned piglets are reared to about six months. They only eat fruit, vegetables and cereals. They are free range (sometimes more free range than we'd like) and enjoy a field to themselves, living in

up-cycled redundant salmon bins for protection from rain, wind or occasional sun.

We grew up eating hog and prefer it to lamb. Reestit mutton is a traditional Shetland dish made from mutton, brined for two to three weeks, then dried in the ceiling of the family home. Mixed with the reek from the peat fire, it has a taste all of its own. Reestit mutton would be either sliced and fried with sheep's fat and eaten with bannocks, or boiled to make soup along with tatties, neeps, carrots, onions and Shetland kale – another wonderful native Shetland crop which takes two years to grow from seed.

Our own free-range hens produce eggs that we sell in the farm shop and use in the kitchen.

In our polytunnel we grow leeks, onions, tomatoes, cucumber, peas, beetroot, cherries and grapes, to name a few. Out in the fields we grow neeps, carrots, broccoli, cauliflower and Shetland kale.

All our cakes, biscuits and sweets are home made. We also make all our own preserves. Our rhubarb jam and beetroot chutney are made using our own produce and we supply Northlink ferries with our jams and marmalades.

www.mackenziesfarmshop.co.uk



Shop, sell, buy, local

SCF young crofter Beth Rose shows how she and her partner encourage people to buy local.

BIRCHWOOD Croft is situated south of Inverness in Strathnairn, bordering onto the Monadhliath, sitting at an altitude of about 280m.

We sell a variety of produce. Our main product is beef from our small herd of Shetland cattle. We have an orchard (that just got savaged by hares), soft fruit area, veg garden and polytunnel – which has been taken over by our hens in their own lockdown bubble. Pork and hogget are sold seasonally.

All our meat is now sold frozen, vacuum packed and all individually cut and priced. More recently we added preserves: a range of chutneys, relishes and jellies. Selling the produce has taken a bit of time and work, to build up our market. How we sell it has evolved and we have certainly had to adapt to a new norm. Before lockdown, our customer base was spread out. Now, the majority are within a 16 mile radius.

Our initial sales were through word of mouth. We then took our meat to two local events to let people see who we were and what we had. We started

selling preserves made from our garden surplus so we had something visible for those events. Beef in a freezer really doesn't aid getting customers to come to see your stall at a market.

Conversations at these events really helped clarify people's expectations for us and what we could do to help them understand more about our produce. Helping people appreciate different cuts of meat, why different cuts have different cutting requirements and getting people to see beyond the supermarket norm have all helped boost the selling aspect.

As Quality Meat Scotland (cattle and sheep) members and part of the Scottish Crofting Produce Mark (meat and preserves), we encourage our customers to come and collect their orders so that they can see the croft for themselves.

Because social media and the blog (www.croftingwife.com) are our two main marketing tools, we feel it is important for people to know that the pictures we provide do give the whole story and that they can be a part of the entire process. The website provides people with up-to-date listings of what we have available and we do network with a few other small-scale providers nearby so that together we can help encourage people to buy local.



LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

Uncommon grains

llafur anghyffredin | arbhar àraid

SCF member Adam Veitch reports on a virtual event held in February, celebrating grains and the culture behind them.

THE EVENT was organised by the Gaia Foundation, an international charitable organisation working alongside Earth's best custodians and defenders for 35 years.

Seed and food sovereignty for climate change resilience is a central pillar of Gaia's work. To achieve that work on our islands, the Seed Sovereignty UK and Ireland Programme was formed within Gaia to support a biodiverse and ecologically sustainable seed system across Britain and Ireland.

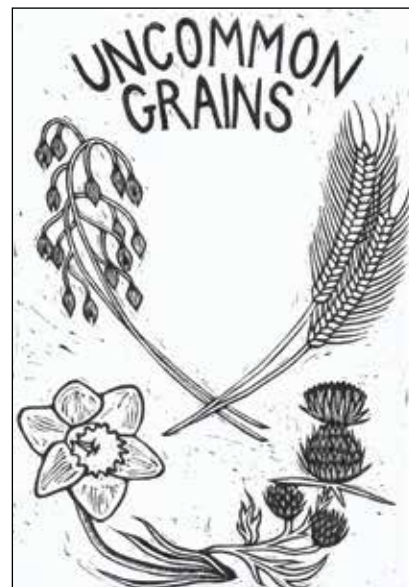
Seed Sovereignty has been nurturing grain-growing groups in particular in Scotland and Wales over the last three years, helping encourage, co-ordinate, share knowledge and break down barriers towards sustainable local grain economies. This event, organised in collaboration between the Seed Sovereignty team and the Scottish Common Grains network, focusing on the uncommon grains bere barley (*eòrna*), rye (*seagal*) and small

oats (*coirce beag*).

The original plan was to have a bit of a barn party – to bring together the grain-growing groups of our Welsh and Scottish networks to share tips, challenges, stories and perhaps a pint or two. However, Covid had other plans for us, so the event was held virtually.

It started with the spoken verse of an old Ghaidhlig poem, *Consecration of the seed*, from the *Carmina Gadelica* of Alexander Carmichael, followed by the longer wistful Welsh poem *Gyfarch Tudar Dylan*. There followed a laid-back, collaborative day of sharing and celebrating each other's work. Short talks covered work on bere and small oats breeding; historical research to break down the small-scale grain machinery barrier; brewing and cooking with bere at home. In amongst it all were plenty of opportunities to chat informally, ask questions and unplug for a break.

The day ended with a virtual ceilidh, clutching beer or tea respectively and singing or playing a song. Not quite a stomping barn dance, but the next best thing and a nurturing close to all who attended.



Small and slow but sustainable

SCF director Yvonne White outlines how she and her partner Joe manage their Highland cattle fold.

THE Romesdal fold of registered, pedigree Highland cattle is located in north east Skye in the Trotternish region, a small fold with seven breeding cows and their followers.

The fold is farm assured and has elite health status. Our cattle feed naturally on grass in the summer months and in winter are fed hay supplemented with bruised oats, shreds and cattle cobs for essential vitamins and minerals. The cattle are never housed, except for Pibroch the Highland stock bull. Pibroch is housed during the winter months for stock management and environmental concerns. Mature Highland bulls are nearly a tonne in weight, thus heavy on wet damp ground which can cause poaching.

For the rest of the fold – who do not have room service on tap and a dry, cosy shelter from November to May – the contours of the land provide their shelter, as do a belt of trees and an old drystone wall. Highland cattle are very hardy to withstand the long, harsh winters common in this region of Scotland, where the breed originated. Nature has provided them with a waterproof, shaggy coat and an extra thick hide. They are tough beasts and much less work than imported breeds.

Highlanders also have attributes other than low maintenance. They are excellent mothers and have little difficulty calving as well as being

good tempered (if handled correctly). Bullocks, and sometimes heifers if destined for the freezer, are dehorned. The meat is superb and very low in cholesterol, owing to the hide and hair doing the job that fat does in other breeds.

We sell Highland beef on a small-scale basis. This suits our animal and land management strategy. The bullocks and sometimes heifers are slaughtered annually in late summer/early autumn, usually aged 30-40 months, upon reaching optimum cull size and after spending their last summer grazing on grass and heather. Demand outweighs supply. It is sold in advance whilst still on the hoof. We don't need to advertise, certainly at present.

We could expand, but that would entail joining up with other cattle breeders to form a supply chain to provide consistency and volume of supply to a wider customer base. In all likelihood it would mean working with others with perhaps differing aims and ideas about throughput, cattle rearing and quality standards.

As a sole operator, we can ensure a consistent, high-quality, naturally-reared product to a small customer base of many years' standing. Moving into a higher-volume market, which is usually more intense, would entail renouncing our current ethos and preferred method of natural cattle raising. Sometimes, just sometimes, small and slow is better.



Pibroch getting a scratch

LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

A vital link



Mull Slaughterhouse

Flora Corbett, chair of Mull Slaughterhouse, shows how they help customers obtain the best value from their animals.

MULL Slaughterhouse was constructed in the 1980s as a slaughter-only facility, to provide for the local community.

From that initial modus operandi, we expanded our structure to include a full cut and pack facility. We have a very personal butchery approach, cutting to detailed specifications, different cut requirements and make burgers, sausages and other products to individual customer requirements.

We package the meat in sealed vacuum bags, to give maximum shelf life and aesthetic appeal. Our labelling includes our customers' own croft or farm name and area of origin, providing full traceability.

Our intricate attention to detail, and focus on building a rapport with customers, has led us to be a focal point for the small farmer and crofter. In the current environment, food traceability is paramount. Combined with our excellent welfare and traditional butchery ethos, this has helped us build up a fantastic base of loyal customers, stretching from as far north as Caithness, right down to the Kintyre peninsula and Arran.

We value quality and attentiveness over throughput and production. Our care for each customer's animals goes from life through to death and we age and butcher each animal to its suitability and help get the best out of each carcass.

The abattoir and butchery facility is a vital link in helping crofters and farmers get extra premium from their animals. It can help boost incomes through retail sales in shops, farmers' markets and hotels, restaurants etc. As butchers, we play the crucial middle role in enabling producers to put their meat on the public plate.

For any enquiries or to book animals for slaughter, please contact Mull Slaughterhouse on 01680 300318 or email info.mullabattoir@gmail.com.



Veg box August



Stringing up cucumbers



Onions

West Coast Organics

Crofters and SCF members Anna and Hanno describe the busy market garden on their croft at Roag in north west Skye.

SINCE moving to Skye in 2015, having previously managed the commercial side of West Ardnamurchan community garden, we have developed our organic-certified market garden. We have about 500m² of polytunnels, 1500m² of outdoor beds, a small orchard and soft fruit.

This year we will do 50 weekly veg boxes from mid-June till mid-December, with the aim to then extend the season until we get to somewhere in the region of 40-50 weeks a year. People sign up for a full years' worth of boxes at a time and pay monthly. We may move towards a full community-supported agriculture model in the future.

Customers collect from the croft or a collection point in Portree. We also plan to add a roadside honesty stall this year for veg which is surplus to the box scheme, as well as meat and eggs.

We grow a wide range of vegetables for our box scheme and do not buy anything in. In 2020 we had tomatoes right through the season from early July until December. Chillies and peppers

also did well. Courgettes from the tunnels crop early, whilst outdoor courgettes in a sheltered spot perform well.

Indoors we also grow early peas and broad beans, French beans, herbs, salad leaves and lettuce, chard, spinach, cucumbers and pumpkins. We do a lot of interplanting to make best use of the indoor space. Outside we have more salad crops, roots, tatties, beetroot, broad beans, peas, parsley, onions, leeks, garlic, spinach, chard, kale, cabbage, spouting broccoli and calabrese, sprouts, celeriac, kohlrabi and a few others.

We also sell some meat – hogget, pork and, coming soon, goat kid. The meat is not organic certified but stock are fed either British-grown or organic feed, so no unsustainable fish proteins, GM soya or the likes. Meat is marketed direct to consumers who order and pay a small deposit for their half or whole animal in advance of slaughter and butchery, or in the case of pigs, before the weaners are even bought in. From 2021 we will also be adding organic certified eggs to our box offer and honesty stall.

To see more of what we do, head over to www.instagram.com/westcoastorganics.

Crofting advice through the Farm Advisory Service



National Advice Hub
T: 0300 323 0161
E: advice@fas.

Call the Farm Advisory Service helpline for up to half an hour of free advice on all crofting and agricultural matters, available for all crofters and smallholders, whether new starts or old hands!

And for advice tailored to your croft and situation, benefit from an annual subscription with SAC, part-funded through the Farm Advisory Service, for £73.43 + VAT for two hours of advice, newsletters and updates.

Contact your local SAC office or the free FAS helpline for independent, unbiased, local and up-to-date advice.



The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
Europe investing in rural areas



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot



@FASScot

Harbro
QUALITY LIVESTOCK NUTRITION

THREE STEP 1>2>3 SHEEP NUTRITION SOLUTION

Feet & Fertility

Improve conception rates and combat foot issues

Feed Spring to Autumn



Energyze Forage Booster

Energy and nutrient support for the early stages of foetal growth and development

Feed Autumn to Winter



Energyze Vitality

Aids prevention of twin lamb disease. Improves colostrum quality. Helps produce strong, healthy lambs

Feed late Winter to Spring



Contact your nearest Harbro Country Store for details:

www.harbro.co.uk/country-stores

FOLLOW OUR FEEDS



LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

Bees

SCF member Lis Phillips shares her experience of keeping bees on her croft in Breakish, Isle of Skye.

BEEKEEPING and honey production on the Isle of Skye is at best a marginal business.

Rain, wind and the lack of commercially-grown crops such as oilseed rape mean that the Skye beekeeper is unlikely to have any more than a super (10kg) of honey from each hive – and that only if the summer is favourable and the bees productive.

Bees do sting and beekeeping requires quite a bit more work (and heavy lifting) than most people expect. The equipment and start-up costs are quite high unless you are a competent joiner; and there is always a concern that if your bees swarm they might make a home in your neighbour's chimney!

If you are lucky enough to achieve a harvest, the honey will be of exceptional quality and taste and there will be a very ready market for it. Beeswax, a precious by-product of the honey harvest, can be used to make candles, furniture polish, lip balm and soap. Licenses are required for some products and there are strict rules about honey labels if you are selling to the public.

Skye and Lochalsh Beekeepers Association promotes the use of locally-adapted and sourced bees. Beekeepers who buy in or bring in foreign (non-local) bees risk bringing in disease, including



varroa, a mite which can wipe out a hive if left untreated. Large areas of Skye remain *varroa*-free at present and the association works to keep it that way, providing support, encouragement and advice to new beekeepers and lending out equipment for the all-important honey harvest.

We are all becoming increasingly aware of the vital importance of bees as pollinators. Our own vegetable and soft fruit production has certainly improved since we started beekeeping, though bees are notoriously fickle and will often disappear to a nearby sycamore tree just when

you want them to pollinate your apple orchard.

All crofters can improve the lot of both *apis mellifera* (the honey bee) and the wild bee population. Planting willow, oak and hawthorn trees will provide nectar crops for bees. In the garden, spring-flowering heather, flowering currant, comfrey, ivy, sedum and poached egg flower (*limnanthes douglasii*) are all magnets for bees. If you have a bare patch of ground, sow a packet of borage, an easy-to-grow annual. You will be assured of a bee-filled garden or croft in 2021.

Biadh ionadail a' fàs

BHO sgaoil Covid 19, tha daoine air a bhith nas mothachail air a' bhiadh a tha iad a' ceannachd sna bùthan.

Tha daoine cnuasachadh barrachd air dè cho sàbhailte 's a tha am biadh sin, agus cò às a tha e a' tighinn. Aig an aon àm tha riaghaltasan agus na meadhanan a' dùsgadh mu dheireadh thall gu tuigsinn gu feum atharrachaidhean mòra tachairt airson bacadh a chur air blàthachadh na cruinne. Feumaidh emiseanan CO² a gheàrradh gu an dàrna leth taobh a-staigh an ath dheich bliadhnaichean.

Thèid aig neartachadh agus leudachadh nan cothroman airson biadh ionadail a bhith mar phàirt den fhuasgladh do na ceistean seo. Mar as motha de bhiadh a tha na thoradh bhon sgìre ionadail, 's ann as fheàrr a bhios sin ann an iomadach dòigh. Ma bhios biadh ga ghiùlan astar goirid seach astar fada, bidh e nas ùire, nas fallaine agus nas blasta. Cha bhi feum air a phacadh ann an uiread de phlastaig agus cha bhi feum air stuthan ceimigeach airson a ghlèidheadh fhad 's a tha e siubhal tarsainn an t-saoghail. Mas urrainn dhuinn an ìre de thoradh ionadail a mheudachadh bhiodh sin a' geàrradh sios air an àireamh de làraidhean a tha a' siubhal nan rathaidean, a' losgadh diesel agus a' sputadh a-mach CO².

Tha seo a' tachairt gu ìre bheag mar thà. Eadar margaidean beaga a-muigh, sgeamaichean

bogsa agus reic-dìreach tha dòighean airson luchd-ceannachd agus croitearan/tuathanaich a thoirt ri chèile ag obair air feadh na Rìoghachd. Chan eil a dhìth ach an neartachadh agus an leudachadh.

Anns na dùthchannan Lochlannach thòisich o chionn goirid dòigh ùr air biadh ionadail a reic, sin na cearcallan REKO. Tha iad seo a' toirt croitearan/tuathanaich agus luchd-ceannachd còmhla air-loidhne gus biadh ionadail a reic agus a cheannachd. Tha malairt a' tachairt tro bhuidhnean-dùinte Facebook. Ma tha thu airson biadh a cheannachd tha thu a' cur a-staigh airson ballrachd ann an fear de na buidhnean seo. Mar bhall chì thu an toradh a tha ga reic agus cuiridh tu òrdugh a-staigh. Bidh an toradh òrdaichte ga libhrigeadh gu ionad sònraichte turas gach seachdain aig uair shònraichte agus thig a h-uile neach-ceannachd don àite sin airson an stuth aca a thogail. Dh'fhaodadh seo a bhith muigh, agus mar sin chum an siostam a' dol tro mhiosan a' ghlasaidh.

Tha a-nis còrr is 200 cearcall REKO san t-Suain agus 120 ann an Nirribhidh le còrr is millean ball eatarra. Abair adhartas!

The advantages of local food, with information on a Scandinavian direct selling phenomenon, the REKO-ring.

Gabhan Mac a'Phearsain



ON THE CROFT

Shared steps for common grazings



Machair habitat, South Uist



Blanket bog habitat with sphagnum moss in bog pools

Project officer **Robyn Stewart** reports

OUTER Hebrides – Shared Steps for Common Grazings is a project led by the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism, funded by Outer Hebrides LEADER and NatureScot.

The project ran from November 2019 to December 2020 in conjunction with the wider NatureScot-led project. It piloted POBAS, an Outcome-Based Approach in Scotland, which aims to engage crofters and farmers in the development of an innovative new approach to delivering environmental benefits on agricultural land.

Shared Steps for Common Grazings focused on developing a scorecard system for common grazings, which assesses their overall habitat condition and environmental benefits through a series of simple multiple-choice questions. The scorecard measures key results-based indicators of habitat quality, such as species diversity or vegetation structure, which can be directly influenced

The innovative work undertaken by Robyn Stewart in the Outer Hebrides has the potential to open up future agri-environment schemes to much wider participation. Having had a chance to test out the scorecards on my own common grazing, I found them simple to use, intuitive and they have certainly helped me better understand what we should be trying to achieve as land managers.

Donald MacKinnon

by management. For example – for wading birds, points would be given for managing rush cover and providing wet areas. At the end of the assessment each area of habitat is given a final score out of 10 with payments being linked to the scores – ie the higher the score, the higher the payment.

Four habitat scorecards were developed for the Outer Hebrides with input from crofters and local organisations such as RSPB,

Carlway Estate Trust and SCF, then tested on the ground from Barra to the Butt of Lewis.

The scorecards focus on the following habitat types: blanket bog, machair, wader grazed grassland and general habitats, eg heath and grassland mosaic.

Despite being hampered by Covid19 restrictions, we held scorecard training sessions either online or socially-distanced out on site, gaining valuable feedback

from fourteen grazing clerks or local experts, eg Peatland Action. We held a successful end-of-project webinar in December with almost 40 attendees, where the scorecards and payment structure were presented.

Kirsten Brewster of NatureScot explained that they intend to take forward the pilots based in Skye, Outer Hebrides, Argyll, Strathspey, East Lothian and Dumfries and Galloway into the next phase of the POBAS project, getting feedback from testing this results-based approach on the ground, which will be useful for informing future rural policy.

Next steps involve the following activities for crofters and farmers from April 2021 onwards:

- Carry out monitoring using scorecards and associated guidance in spring/ summer 2021 and potentially trial a basic farm environment assessment.
- Trial the new app that allows fields to be scored using the habitat scorecards.
- Consider the opportunities for changing management to potentially increase scores in the future.

ON THE CROFT

Increasing the diversity of grassland swards



Multispecies sward containing 13 different species of grasses, legumes and herbs

SAC Portree's Janette Sutherland highlights a new FAS online tool.

CROFTERS are eligible for CAGS support for reseeding and over-sowing. With justification on agricultural and environmental grounds, this support could include sowing multi-species swards. The most common definition of a multi-species seed mixture is that it contains two or more species, not including perennial rye grass or white clover.

Recent research has shown numerous benefits of increasing the plant diversity in our grazed and mown pastures. However, please note that the crofting counties have lots of species-rich grassland and hay meadow fields. Specific advice should be sought for these fields before any changes are made.

All fields are unique and the tool – www.fas.scot/grassland/multi-species-grassland-sward-tool – lets you input attributes of your field. It will then provide a list of which non-grass species to consider including in a mixture. The tool will provide a brief description of the species, their attributes and the benefits they can bring you. Multi-species swards can be more resilient, which is of increasing importance with a changing climate.

For example, species with deeper roots can be beneficial during a time of unexpected drought.

Trials have demonstrated a yield increase from their use, showing less need for bagged fertiliser whilst maintaining yields, which is a boost for farm profitability. The Smart Grass Project, led by University College Dublin, found that “compared to perennial rye grass, multi-species swards produced the same quantity of herbage dry matter with 45% less fertiliser nitrogen.”

The tool will explain other useful properties, for example nitrogen-fixing capability or tolerance to various environmental factors.

Multi-species swards also have biodiversity benefits. By increasing the diversity of the plants in our fields, we can increase the benefits for many kinds of wildlife, including insects. Insects may not be glamorous, but their numbers are what sustain many more charismatic kinds of farmland wildlife.

Using multi-species swards can reduce your carbon footprint, by reducing emissions from the field and during fertiliser manufacture and transportation.

We would like to hear how you get on using the online tool for your farm or croft. Please send feedback to David.Lawson@sruc.ac.uk. Not sure if it's worth the effort? Be inspired by two farmers' stories of using multi-species swards on their farms at www.fas.scot/grassland/multi-species-grassland-sward-tool.

Liver fluke risk and agri-environment schemes

THE LIVER FLUKE is a highly pathogenic flatworm parasite which can cause significant disease and production loss in sheep and cattle.

It has a complicated life-cycle, involving a tiny mud snail as intermediate host, so is typically found in low-lying, boggy or fluky ground. Some agri-environment schemes promote the grazing of such wetland areas on farms for other environmental benefits associated with these habitats. As a result, there is some perceived reluctance amongst livestock farmers to engage in such schemes for fear of increasing the liver fluke risk to their livestock.

Moredun has been investigating the liver fluke risk associated with one of these conservation grazing scenarios, namely grazing newly-established wader scrapes at SRUC Hill and Mountain Research Centre at Kirkton, Crianlarich, in collaboration with Professor Davy McCracken and colleagues.

Wetland birds such as snipe, oystercatcher, curlew and lapwing are in serious decline in Scotland. One way to encourage them back into farmed landscapes is to introduce wader scrapes – typically small shallow ponds with muddy margins which provide access to invertebrates as food for water



Sampling wader scrapes at SRUC, Kirkton, with in-bye fields beyond

fowl and wading birds. SRUC established a number of wader scrapes at Kirkton and Auchtertyre approximately five years ago, under a Scottish Government Agri-environment and Climate Scheme.

Wetland areas and grazing animals would not appear to be compatible from a liver fluke risk perspective, hence our interest in actually monitoring the situation over time as the wader scrapes established. Small mobs of sheep are brought into the scrape areas from neighbouring in-bye fields for short periods of grazing. This is deemed essential to maintain

the sward at the requisite height for nesting etc, to break up the vegetation and provide dung for invertebrates. It also prevents the margins from becoming overgrown and inaccessible to the birds.

We tested faecal samples from grazing sheep for fluke eggs monthly over several grazing seasons, and have yet to find evidence of fluke infection as a result of grazing around the wader scrapes. We also sampled the mud snail population around the margins of the scrapes over time. The liver fluke snail was a little slow to establish, but is there now, but we have yet to find

evidence of liver fluke infection in the snails. We have, however, found liver fluke eggs in deer faecal samples around the scrape margins, so fluke is there, currently at very low levels.

From the work to date, the risk to livestock from grazing under this specific agri-environment scheme would currently appear to be lower than in the in-bye fields from where they came. It would be premature to say there is no risk, as we can never say never with fluke! How long this remains the case depends on how the schemes are managed, eg stocking density, length of grazing periods, etc.

The study reinforces the message that farmers and land managers need to be able to assess fluke risk on their own farm, based on local environmental conditions, diagnostic testing and grazing management practices, because every farm is different, whether in an agri-environment scheme or not.

The ideal scenario is to identify the potential win-wins and encourage evidence-based decision-making such that agri-environment schemes promote biodiversity, but not at the expense of animal health.

Dr Philip Skuce, Moredun Research Institute

Peatland ACTION

Restoring Scotland’s peatlands for the many benefits to people and to nature.

Climate change is the most serious threat to Scotland’s environment. Early action is central to overcoming these impacts. Peatland restoration offers a solution.



Helping us to reduce the effects of climate change by storing carbon.



Regulating water flow and quality, improving flood management, fisheries and drinking water supplies.



Benefitting farming through mutually beneficial grazing, and improving access for both stock and people.



Internationally important habitats, home to rare and often unique plants, invertebrates and birds.



Restoring Scotland’s Peatlands
Ath-stèidheachadh talamh mònach na h-Alba

We provide bespoke advice on restoration management and funding.

Contact us: peatlandaction@nature.scot
Follow us: @PeatlandACTION

nature.scot/PeatlandACTION

ON THE CROFT

RSPB and crofters enhancing Scotland's crex appeal

Louise Muir, RSPB Argyll islands corncrake conservation advisor on a scheme to boost the fortunes of this rare and noisy bird.

CORNCRAKE CALLING is a four-year project, part-funded through the generous support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund and managed through RSPB Scotland.

Working closely with land managers, local communities and national audiences, the aim is to provide these iconic birds with the best possible chance of future success. Corncrakes rely on crofters and farmers to provide them with the right conditions for breeding and successfully raising chicks.

When the birds return from wintering in Africa, they need long vegetation to hide in. This long vegetation is perfect for concealing nests and rearing chicks. If silage and hay crops are cut later in the season in a corncrake-friendly manner, multiple broods can be raised and flightless chicks can escape the mowers.

With the project now underway, Louise Muir from the RSPB is working with a number of farmers and crofters across Argyll. "The response from crofters interested in helping this little bird has been very positive," she said. "Often small changes in farming and crofting practices can make a big difference."

Derek and Joanne Middleton croft on the southern tip of the Isle of Islay and are hoping to encourage corncrakes onto their croft. Working with RSPB Scotland, a large area of early and late cover is being established and grazing will be reduced on parts of the croft over the summer months. "We want to croft alongside our local wildlife and not against it. The advice we have been given will help us do this," they explained.



Corncrake



Derek and Joanne Middleton on their croft on Islay

© RSPB Images, Graham Goodall.

Geese and deer in crofting areas

David Muir, SCF council member from Benbecula, reports on ongoing attempts to manage geese grazing on croft land and marauding deer which have led to a worrying incidence of Lyme disease in the Western Isles.

LARGE NUMBERS of greylag and migratory barnacle geese continue to be present on the islands.

Greylags are in permanent residence throughout Uist and Barra, while barnacles are mainly on machairs towards the northwest and north of North Uist during winter months, having migrated from Greenland and Iceland. And, of course, greylag geese are to be found throughout the highlands and islands, for example, in Skye, Lewis and Harris and all over the north west coast.

In Uist, counts of greylags are normally undertaken twice yearly during February and September. Due to coronavirus restrictions, large areas of South Uist and Benbecula were not counted in September 2020 and no count has been carried out this February. However, indications from last September show that the total number of birds was at least as high as the

previous year, ie 8,979. February counts are routinely lower than those in September, due to winter mortality and shooting. Numbers recorded in February 2019 were 5,314, while those in February 2020 were 4711.

Reports suggest that barnacle geese are present in similar population size as in recent years, ie 5,000 to almost 8,000. Numbers vary due to the transient nature of migratory birds, with the main Greenland population resident in Islay during winter. The Uist and Tiree Barnacle Goose Scheme provides funding for refuge and feeding areas on Tiree and on islands offshore from North Uist but, unfortunately, only benefits a few crofters.

The final version of the Uist Deer Management Plan has been under development at a glacially slow pace over the past four or five years. The group last met in November 2019, but due to coronavirus subsequent meetings and a public meeting were cancelled. However, subgroup meetings have been held online to help further the final version of the plan.

A main point for recent discussion has been writing the high-priority control areas (HPCA)

working plan section. These areas cover croft land, machairs and local school and playing fields. Arrangements for non-lethal scaring activities and licensed shooting of marauding stags will be given priority in these areas.

The HPCA working plan has sections such as legal requirements; public safety; community reporting procedures; estate protocols; and protocols for shooting on croft land. The objective of the working plan is to find practical solutions to reducing negative impacts of deer in view of concerns about the proximity and increasing presence of deer in areas of habitation.

Part of the focus of agreed actions is to reduce incidence of Lyme disease in residents and visitors alike. While a variety of small mammals carry pathogens that cause Lyme disease, and although deer do not, they are an important host for the breeding life-cycle of ticks due to their large size and mobility. Information about research being undertaken by the University of Glasgow on Uist can be found at www.gla.ac.uk/research/beacons/onehealth/lymediseaseuist.

At the time of writing there seems to be no final version of the plan in sight.

ON THE CROFT

Sound foundations for croft woodlands

The Croft Woodland Project (CWP), which has helped plant over one million trees throughout the crofting counties, has appointed two new advisers, writes project manager Iona Hyde, who covers the Argyll area.

GORDON CUMMING (South Highland and North Isles) and Rory Finlay (North Highland) have joined myself and Viv Halcrow (Western Isles).

Nearly 300 crofters have created woodland with help from the CWP, a partnership between Woodland Trust Scotland, SCF, Point and Sandwick Trust, Scottish Forestry, Coigach and Assynt Living Landscapes, Argyll Small Woods Coop, Orkney Woodland Project, Shetland Amenity Trust and the Communities Housing Trust.

Between 2015 and 2020 the team planted 700ha of new native woodlands and brought over 1000ha of existing woodland back into active management. The project delivered 30 training courses and held the first croft woodlands conference. Other successes

included publishing the *Highlands and Islands Woodlands Handbook* and setting up a dedicated loan fund for croft woodland projects.

The second phase of CWP, running to 2025, will continue to support crofters, common grazings committees and smallholders within the crofting counties – by carrying out site assessments, offering technical advice and assisting with access to funding. Advisers will also offer advice on management of existing woodlands and continue to run training events. Other plans for phase two of the project include:

- planting two million more native trees;
- collaborating with nurseries to secure supplies of local-provenance trees suited to the region;
- piloting MyForest Creation, a user-friendly tool for developing new woodland proposals, with the Sylva Foundation and Scottish Forestry;
- working with the insurance industry to secure affordable woodland cover for small woodlands;



Gordon Cumming



Rory Finlay

- championing croft woodlands in relation to post-Brexit rural funding;
- exploring the potential for carbon income from croft woodlands.

Donald John MacSween, who is chairing the advisory group for the second phase, running to 2025, said: "The project has been a huge success in every crofting area, due to knowledgeable staff,

ease of access to the scheme and good partnership working across the Highlands and Islands. The foundations are sound and I am so pleased that it will continue for another five years and hopefully for many more after that."

For more information email crofting@woodlandtrust.org.uk or call Iona Hyde on 07840 699427.



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

The Woodland Trust offers free planting and woodland management advice to crofters, common grazings and small holders.

Find out how useful trees are. Get in touch.

Image: Phillip Formby/WTML

07840 699427

crofting@woodlandtrust.org.uk

woodlandtrust.org.uk/croft-woodlands

ON THE CROFT

Plockton high school field trip



Walking the hill



Cleaning the hydro scheme intake grate

Fairer convergence payments a welcome win for crofters

THE SECOND tranche on the convergence uplift was paid in January and SCF acknowledged the timely and fairer payments of this, and less favoured areas support, after a sustained campaign on behalf of crofters.

The convergence uplift money was clearly intended for crofters and farmers on rough grazing. We have argued this point since the money came to Scotland. It is gratifying to see Scottish Government has acknowledged this, with a change in payment proportions in favour of those who earned the uplift through historically receiving low agricultural support payments – those on the hill and moor.

There was discontent across the board, however, about Scottish Government using this money to fill in the self-inflicted deficit in the Less Favoured Areas Support Scheme. This should have been made up from other government funds.

We would not expect to see everyone happy, but it was disappointing that the farmers union complained that arable land was not given enough. That region already collects well above the European average and has taken the bulk of this payment, which was intended as a rebate to those on low payments.

Now we need to see support mechanisms for the constrained areas redesigned to reflect the importance of high nature value land management. Most of Scotland's high nature value regions are to be found where crofting and upland grazing take place, areas that provide public goods despite facing natural constraints.

We want to see public money being used to pay for these public goods.



Inside the turbine house

SCF member Cheryl McIntyre, clerk at North Talisker, shows how pupils are learning about crofting.

EIGHT S3 students from Plockton High School, studying on the crofting education programme, came to visit North Talisker sheep stock club, common grazings and hydro scheme last November.

Their course is run in conjunction with the National Trust for Scotland. The group meets for a full day once a month throughout the year, giving students hands-on experience in a variety of crofting activities.

North Talisker sheep stock club organised gathers for the two hirsels on North Talisker's land to be brought into the smaller hill parks for the tups going out. The students observed the tups and ewes being active and demonstrated their knowledge from a previous lesson in sheep ID by noting that "you can tell which sheep is a tup because it has three tails."

At the hydro scheme intake, after some maintenance – cleaning the heather and moss out of the intake grate – we looked at a new water throughput monitoring system set up by a local crofter and engineer, then down the track to the bottom of the waterfall to the turbine house for



a look inside.

On the way back over the track the students got experience of cattle droving, by separating off four Highland cows from the rest of the cattle on the hill and corralling back to the inbye of a croft where they'll be for the winter. Like a lot of common grazings, individual crofters must take their stock off the hill over the winter months to prevent damage to the moorland.

We talked about how even with the sheep stock club at North Talisker being almost 100 years old, there is always room to diversify and modernise. While upland sheep hill farming is an ancient way of using and managing marginal land, we have modern tools to ensure we stay competitive – from our Argocat and Suzuki KingQuad to simple improvements like connecting our sheds to mains electricity and upgrading from wooden handling equipment to galvanised metal and recycled plastic.

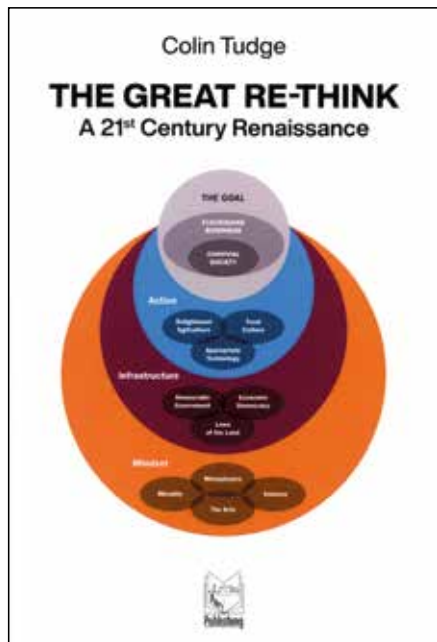
Part of ensuring this type of crofting continues into the future is to make sure our young folk get involved at an early age, which is why we were keen to have the students visit. By diversifying the hill (such as having the hydro scheme), more people with different sets of skills and interests can get involved.

To find out more, visit www.northtalisker.com.

BOOK REVIEWS

By Patrick Krause

The Great Re-Think



A 21st Century Renaissance

by Colin Tudge

THIS BOOK, or survival manual, by the respected science, agriculture, food and philosophy writer Colin Tudge, could be subtitled *What you need to know about anything that really matters*.

In an extremely eloquent and conversational style, with not a little wry satire, Colin lays out some

comprehensive information about what is going wrong with the way we humans live, and the consequences, in a logical and holistic depiction. Some of what's wrong is so obvious it could be humorous, except that it is way too seriously absurd. It reminds me of a witticism on a sticker: "This would be really funny if it wasn't happening to me". Well it is happening, to all of us.

The natural philosopher, as scientists were aptly called, then draws on a very wide scientific and philosophical reservoir, the perennial wisdom, including his own previous works, to offer a way forward that could lead to "convivial societies living in a flourishing biosphere".

As the author says: "We – humanity – could and should be looking forward to a long and glorious future – a million years for starters; at peace, personally fulfilled and enjoying the company of our fellow creatures in great diversity and abundance. Yet, as things are, we seem to be staring Armageddon in the face. So what's gone wrong? What can we do to put things right?"

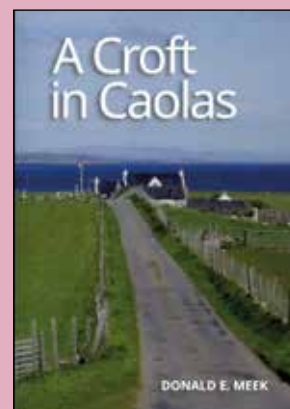
It is one of those books that makes absolute sense. As you read you can't help but think "Yes, of course!" It is one of those rare books that, having read it, lingers in the mind in such starkness that you just have to pick it up again. And again.

I am recommending it to everyone I know; and I recommend it to you. Those in positions of power probably will not read it, but Colin's point is that it is us, the ordinary folk, that can and are bringing about a renaissance, a new way of doing things that leaves their philosophy of greed and exploitation obsolete.

A beautifully crafted book, Colin writes with the three universal moral principles – compassion, humility and reverence of the biosphere. It is a book of hope.

Launched on January 7, 2021, RRP: £15.00, the book can be ordered from Blackwell online for £13.80 inc p&p.

A Croft in Caolas



by Donald E. Meek

WHILST GIVING a very clear historic picture of life on the Isle of Tiree over the period 1770-2020, this is an account of people, generations of a family who worked the land.

Written in a story-telling style, you are drawn into the family, the characters and the events that dominated that period. It is a very personal account, a fascinating real-life saga, written with feeling, admiration and a love for those people that led to Donald E. Meek.

ON THE CROFT

Welfare of animals in transport

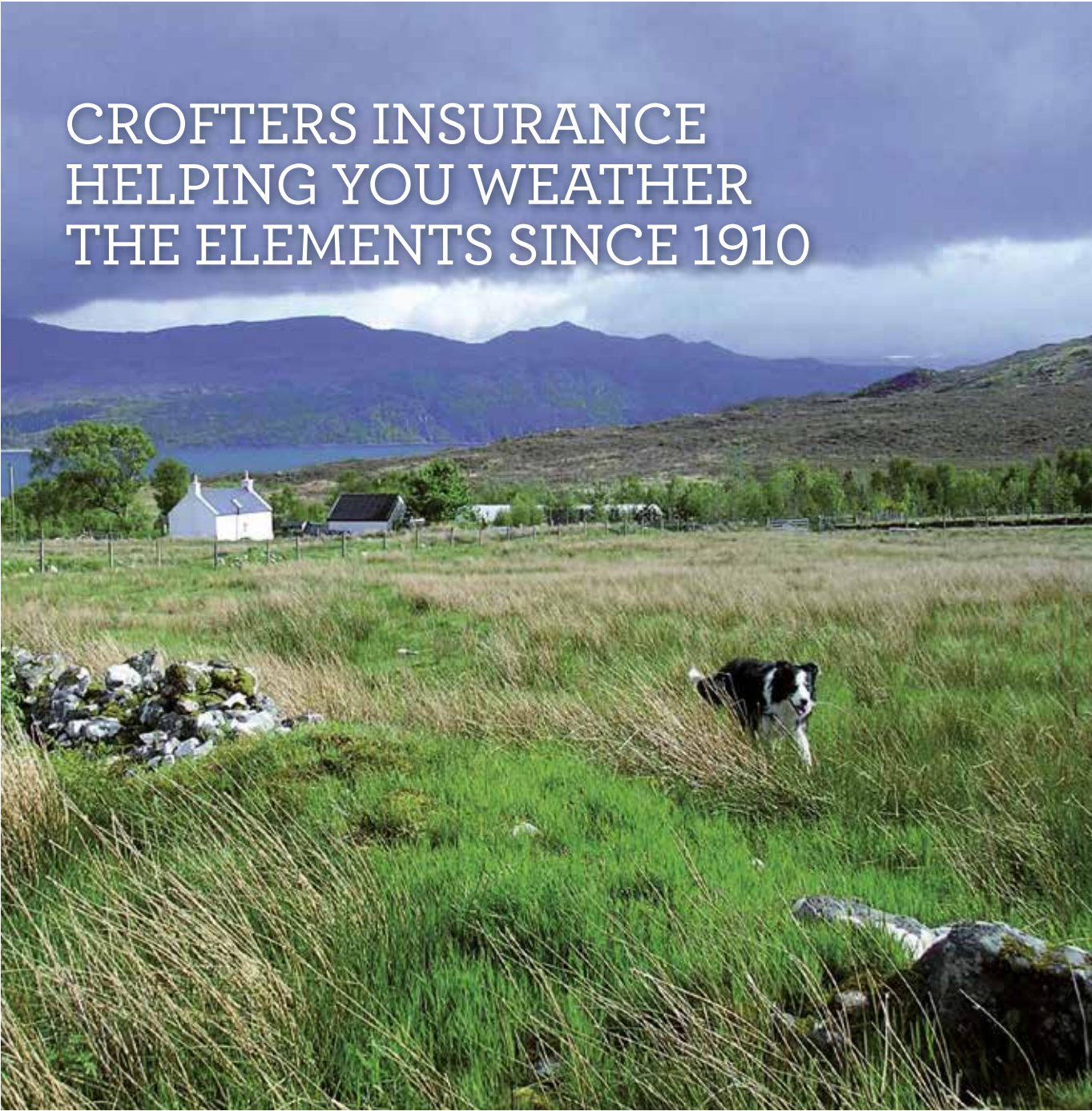
BY THE time you read this, the Scottish Government consultation: *Farm Animal Welfare Committee's opinion on the welfare of animals during transport* will have closed.

We hope crofters did respond to the proposals, as they can adversely affect crofting very seriously.

Representative bodies such as Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Shetland Isles Council and SCF submitted responses, arguing that the proposals are unrealistic, disproportionate and threaten Highlands and Islands agriculture. Let's hope we are listened to.

The response submitted by SCF can be found on our website.





CROFTERS INSURANCE
HELPING YOU WEATHER
THE ELEMENTS SINCE 1910

Find out more by contacting
your local NFU Mutual branch
at [nfumutual.co.uk](https://www.nfumutual.co.uk)



NFU Mutual
INSURANCE | PENSIONS | INVESTMENTS

It's about time®

The National Farmers Union Mutual Insurance Society Limited (No. 111982). Registered in England. Registered Office: Tiddington Road, Stratford upon Avon, Warwickshire CV37 7BJ. Authorised by the Prudential Regulation Authority and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority. A member of the Association of British Insurers. For security and training purposes, telephone calls may be recorded and monitored.

New HQ staff member

Helen Christelow introduces herself.

JOINED SCF, working part time two days a week, at the beginning of December.

It was great to be in the office learning from Sandra and Erin. Unfortunately, due to the latest lockdown from Boxing Day, Sandra and Erin have mostly been working from home and I have been based at the office. We set up a WhatsApp group, so whenever I get stuck or have a question, there's always help at hand! As the weeks have passed, I'm gradually learning more about the organisation, getting to know and speaking to our members.

I was born in North London and have lived mostly in the south east of England. We started visiting the Highlands around 20 years ago, staying with my sister and her family in Ratagan. My children and I have many happy holiday memories of the area.

I never imagined that I would end up living in the Highlands. Following a bit of a life change and some great luck, I thought why not, and I was able to move to Scotland in 2016. I have to say I haven't regretted that move for a single day. Of course I do moan about the weather occasionally!

I feel very grateful as I live on a loch side in a friendly community, with incredible views of the Five Sisters of Kintail. I love walking, cycling and all the nature and wildlife I am surrounded by, so living where I do is the perfect place for me.

I'm enjoying my new role with SCF and look forward to speaking to, and hopefully meeting more of you in the near future.



SCF e-newsletter

Are you receiving the SCF monthly e-newsletter?

Keep up-to-date with crofting news and information, training, funding and events straight into your in-box every month.

Get in touch with HQ
01599 530005 or email
hq@crofting.org.



Can you help?

The Crofter archive at SCF HQ is missing issues 50 to 59.

If anyone has their own archive copies or knows anyone who has, please could we borrow them to scan or copy. These issues would mostly have been the old pink newspaper-style ones, not the current style.

If you have any, or know someone who might have, please let us know.



How to contact us

Postal address and registered office

Scottish Crofting Federation Headquarters
Kyle of Lochalsh IV40 8AX

General enquiries and membership:
hq@crofting.org
01599 530 005

Training:
training@crofting.org
01854 612 220

The Crofter.
Fiona Mandeville, editor
fiona@crofting.org
01471 822 297

Advertising:

Fiona Macleod
ads@crofting.org
01863 766386

SCF legal helpline:
01599 230 300

visit www.crofting.org
for full contact details

Company Number SC 218658
Charity Number SC 031919

Although every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of the information printed in this publication, SCF cannot accept liability for errors or omissions. The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the SCF.

