

SCOTTISH CROFTERS UNION ANNUAL CONFERENCE 6 NOVEMBER 1997;
THE INTEGRATION OF AGRICULTURAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND EMPLOYMENT
POLICY IN THE CROFTING CONTEXT

CROFTING AND THE NATURAL HERITAGE; FINDING THE COMMON GROUND

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Insert A

There are of course the caricatures from the other perspective. We can all recall the near libellous jibes of the late Nicholas Fairbairn and the views from the deep south of England of subsidy, dependency, indolence.

But, frankly do we believe any of these comments arguments or views? Are they real or imagined? And if so who by? And which if any is real? They are certainly the stuff of the newspaper columns.

Insert B

Crofters Commission statistics tell me that there were 17,685 Registered Crofts in 1996. More significantly only 18% were owner occupied. With 1% owner occupation in the Western Isles. This suggests to me that you have perhaps not as great a control of your own destiny as people in other parts of Scotland. Gordon MacMillan estimates that Registered Crofts are occupied by some 11,000 to 11,500 crofting households with a total population of over 33,000. But that is only about 10% of the population of the Crofting Counties and yet the activity which is performed in managing the land, and therefore managing the environment, is far more important than the simple population statistics would suggest. And Commission records show that there are some 1,560 'absentee' crofters and others estimate that between 50% and 70% of crofts are being worked at present and that there are perhaps less than 8,000 active crofting households. The point for me is that the environmental assets of crofting land is the result of crofters activity and with declining numbers there is less active management.

But why is this the case? Economics has to be a major part of the answer. Although the figures are now dated, your Union estimated that in 1989, of an average annual crofter household income of £8,500 only 4% was generated on the croft, 33% came from support mechanisms, significantly 63% came from activities off the croft. The amount of time therefore available to manage the croft is limited - and therefore the amount of time to engage in non remunerative activities such as environmental management is minuscule. Labour inputs into crofting agriculture overall appear to be declining further.

Examination of the statistics of financial support perhaps gives the reason why. Only some £20 million of support is provided for crofting agriculture and associated infrastructure. Other commentators have noted that this is less than 2% of UK farm support (a far cry from arable aid in England) and perhaps accounts for only 10% of

net income. So subsidy junky myths are finally blown I hope, More important it is clear that the economics of crofting agriculture remain marginal. And yet you are working in areas of high environmental value - often as a result of the practices which you have performed over many generations.

The nature of the support is also critical, both in terms of determining the type of activity and its impact on the environment. Payments under livestock support regimes (HLCA, Ewe Premium, Sheep Annual Premium, encourage high stocking rates but do not give any encouragement to higher labour input to manage the sheep flock, hence flock sizes per shepherd are significantly higher than before. Payments for environmental work have, until the introduction of the Countryside Premium Scheme, been restricted to ESAs and even the annual ceilings and low support rates have resulted, sadly in underspends on the agri-environment programme, and claims by hard nosed financial scrutineers that the programme is over funded.

INSERT C

Welcome though all of this activity is in bringing economic benefit to the communities of the Highlands and Islands it means that less work is put into environmental management - a point I shall return to later.

INSERT X

The way the land is used is not static. Far from being determined by environmental negativity as some would claim, there are much larger forces at work which have had a significant impact on the land. Our major survey of land cover change over the 40 years from the late 1940s has shown significant increases in afforestation, with conversion of mire, moorland and rough grassland to coniferous plantation (a tenfold increase from 40,000 hectares to 370,000 hectares). A 66 % increase in bracken, one third increase in managed improved grassland, and a fourfold increase in the area of reservoirs to nearly 20,000 hectares. Significant decreases have been a one third reduction in mixed and broad-leaved woodland.

I am sure that we can all interpret these figures as reflecting the impact of the forestry support regime, low land values, the CAP and the exploitation of land and water resources for the benefit of Scotland. And have they all been beneficial to you? Are the jobs secure in the longer term? Are the benefits really accruing to the area? Or leaking out?

INSERT E

Systems based on compensation for 'net profit foregone' are hardly a good use of taxpayers money and require very careful judgements by SNH staff and Board members to safeguard prime wildlife interest which Parliament and Government has instructed us to do.

INSERT ***

And what about National Parks? Do you see these as yet another threat? SNH has been asked formally by the Minister to prepare a system which is both natural heritage and people friendly and that can be tailor made to the requirements in

different parts of Scotland We intend to seek views early next year on the key issues and then to consult more formally on the draft proposals later in the year. We need input from crofters and farmers and all other interests so that the propositions we ultimately put to Government are well informed, will benefit the natural heritage, and will ensure that local people have a key role throughout.

INSERT F and G

But let us not treat the environment as a headache and a bane on human well being. Let us treat it as an asset to be protected and sustainably exploited. You as crofters must be proud of your environment and your role in it. You have shown how a globally endangered species can begin the path to recovery: calling male corncrakes are breaking out all over.

You have shown that the white tailed sea eagle can be successfully re introduced - even despite local difficulties.

You have shown the role that you can play in allowing barnacle geese numbers to recover to biologically viable levels

You have shown how to protect and maintain 2 most important habitats of international significance - the blanket mires of the Flow Country and the machairs of the Hebrides.

These animals and plants are a key resource, not just for the crofting counties but internationally. Surely we can be proud that the Highlands and Islands commands such a high status in the UK, in Europe and internationally. And that, in considerable part is because of the role which you have played over many generations including the current one. So instead of thinking that the designations of areas as SSSIs, SPAs, SACs, NNRs, National Parks etc endangers the survival of people, and justifies notices saying 'Welcome to the museum of crofting life' let us celebrate and exploit this resource. The progress which we have made, and the further progress which we could make, would make the crofting counties the living exemplification of agriculture and the natural heritage : a world role model. But it needs resources. There is surely an overwhelming case for more resources for maintaining and enhancing these environmental assets - directed in particular at the labour inputs and the positive environmental outputs?????

INSERT H

Let us also acknowledge that the environment means jobs and that it brings money into the economy. There are 2,000 jobs in natural heritage related activities in the Highlands and Islands, over 400 wild life tourism jobs. Mountaineering supports almost 4,000 jobs and generates over £100 million per annum income. Significantly, compared to the rest of Scotland, there is a greater proportion of jobs related directly or indirectly to the environment in the Highlands and Islands. And more significantly still our surveys have discovered that a higher proportion of jobs related to the environment are in the more economically fragile areas (as defined by the HIE). Often, when land is transferred from sporting estate management to environmental

management, jobs are created: a tenfold increase in the case of the best ??? estate in Strathspey.

And do not forget the economic benefits of SNH's presence and its activity in the area. We have 187 staff based in the Highlands and Islands spread throughout the area in 15 offices. They inject about £7.4 million into the economy. In addition a further £4.6 million is provided through grants, management agreements, action projects and initiatives. Using a ??conservative, reasonable ??multiplier we create the equivalent of over 250 jobs and generate over £14.5 million into the local economy. These jobs and expenditure figures are, I hope you will agree, significant in the area when set alongside the contribution from other public sources of employment and money.

INSERT J

SNH is also a landowner with major social and economic , as well as environmental, responsibilities. Take Rum for example. Our first responsibility has to be to the natural heritage. Although it is designated as an SSSI, NNR and NSA and will become and SAC, the habitats are degraded as a result of decades of mismanagement: over grazing by sheep (until they were removed) and by deer (protected because of a critical research project, the results of which are influencing a sea change in deer management) insufficient cattle, and intensive muirburn. Not only will we protect the species (the internationally significant Manx shearwater population for example) but we will continue, hopefully at a greater pace, to increase the diversity and the productivity biologically??? Of the island by reducing deer numbers and increasing cattle numbers. That is important for its own sake, but I is also important for the opportunities it can create for the future. At present, apart from the teacher employed by Highland Council all residents on Rum are SNH staff or their partners and families. Bt it is our hope, with greater productivity of the land, with improved ferry services to al of the Small Isles and using the telecommunications network, that people will come to live and work there; that our staff and their dependants can retire there. In other words to rebuild an active community based on the reinvigorated natural assets of the island. Our vision is described in our newspaper which is available from all of our offices, and also in the book 'Rum: Nature's Island' compiled by Magnus Magnusson which he will be promoting in Lochinver, Gairloch, Inverness.....later this month. It's a new future for Rum - to benefit people as well as the natural heritage on Rum and hopefully on the Small Isles as a whole.

INSERT K

We are preparing to upgrade our facilities at Knockan on the Inverpolly reserve with a new centre jointly funded by ourselves and CASE and hopefully the lottery. Fro there we will be able to promote satellite centres owned by others On Fair Isle we are collaborating with NTS, the owners and the crofting communities on a marine tourism initiative.

INSERT L

Only last week we announced that a new scheme to help owners and occupiers protect the peatlands of Lewis would be introduced if designation under European Directives is required. Here again, you have in the Crofting Counties internationally important habitats and species. Here again SNH, with the Government's strong

support (?? Ministerial quote) is proposing to deliver a positive management scheme to help you play your role in maintaining the quality and diversity of this habitat. I was pleased to read the Press and Journal comments under the headline 'Lewis wins nature award'. 'The peatlands area on Lewis has won acclaim for its teeming and active blanket bog habitats. And there are hopes that the recognition of the natural heritage of the area at a European level could bring economic spin offs to the island.'

We recognise the concern of crofters and farmers because of the apparent imposition of European designations. We are working actively, and will continue to do so with the support of Government, to seek resolutions. At Inverasdale, for example, we have made an offer, although perhaps we should have made it earlier. At Scadavay, North Uist (Moineach Scadabaigh?) negotiations are proceeding.

Creative approaches are needed and we intend to ensure that they happen. For example, we have secured European Funds under the LIFE programme to trial new management approaches for proposed marine SACs. Three of the four Scottish sites in the programme are in the Highlands and Islands; Loch Man Madadh, Arisaig and around Pap Stour. This project, together with the support of designation of Regulating Orders in appropriate locations will I am convinced, help us to make progress. Certainly our joint efforts with the Highland Council and the Western Isles Council and other partners in the projects will yield a much greater mutual understanding and awareness.

In all of these situations, and others like them, our North and West Area Board Members who have great knowledge and experience of crofting and related issues are a great asset. I hope you will make it your business to approach them directly: Annie MacDonald ?? of South Uist, Bill Ritchie of Assynt, Simon Fraser, Isobel Holborn on Foula, Michael Foxley and Ken Swanson are all there to provide a link.

INSERT M

Take for example the project at Skerray, where 17 crofters running 28 crofts are involved. One important feature is to re-introduce rotational cropping on the in-bye land. This will create a range of different habitats for wildlife. And it will benefit the crofters by providing winter feed for their animals thereby reducing the overall costs of bought feed. In addition, it is hoped that bracken and rush cover will be reduced, a joint woodland scheme introduced and proposals for a footpath network realised.

INSERT N

We are working with The Scottish Office to introduce a new scheme under the agri-environment programme to provide beneficial management of corncrake habitat without the need for SSSI notification!

INSERT P

And, of course, we have just completed the fourth year of our joint initiative with the SCU: the Crofting Township of the Year Award. The prize of £5,000 helps to fund crofting and environmental projects which have been identified by the community in their application. It is inspiring to see fine examples of activity and the sense of community pride in the townships which have won: Aird on Benbecula, Fair Isle, Drumbuie in Wester Ross and now Skerray, and indeed community pride by those which enter the competition. As you know, it has been very well received. Agnes

Gunn, chairman of the Skerry Grazings Committee, this years Award winner, said 'We are trying our best to prove that local development and improved crofting practices can continue in harmony with the natural environment. In this we have been greatly helped and encouraged by SNH through their local staff.' Here again as with the agricultural demonstration projects, you, with our help, are leading the world. Betty McKenzie, the Skerry Grazings Clerk said just the other day 'Our efforts would appear to have aroused some wider interest and we have had visits from groups as far afield as Scandinavia and Slovenia.'