

**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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Introduction

- grateful for opportunity
- the three Es
- mitigating factors..... etc
- theme is that crofting and the natural heritage go hand in hand and the outcome is mutually beneficial but we require to find the common ground
- wish to examine what appear to be commonly held views about development versus the environment, assess what is actually happening and indeed why many consider that perhaps man is the endangered species, point out the signs of hope in the working partnerships which are already underway and to spell out further areas of common ground in policy and in practice.

Development versus the environment

- To many people, if the columns of some newspapers and some politicians in the north are to be believed, development is restricted because the environment and especially environmentalists get in the way. Indeed the phrase "man is the endangered species" has become a truism.
- Let us examine commonly held views
- The simple cause and effect view, that resources from Government and from Europe (alongside those of developers) create more jobs, give greater prosperity and well-being and confidence in communities, is now well established. The environmental resources of water, rock, scenery, fish, birds are to be exploited for the benefit of local communities.

- For example, quarries are just exploiting a resource which is in plentiful supply and thereby creating long-term jobs for local residents. Industrial development in major estuaries is also of long term benefit and brings with it greater prosperity. New methods of production allow the development of new industries which are in tune with the environment, whether aquaculture or microelectronics, and give long-term economic stability. Good sporting estate management is achieved by controlling river systems, and by removing predators; as a result employment for local communities through sporting estate management is maintained. Crofters are the guardians of the land, always have been and always will be. There is no need for a body like SNH.
- And look at what the environmentalists do! They buy land and act as absentee landowners. They employ staff who are not born and brought up locally and bring attitudes and lifestyles which are not in keeping with the area. They drive around in new vehicles and work from well-appointed offices. They claim, albeit unconvincingly, that the environment is a great asset of the crofting counties but all their efforts seem to stop activity or go through labyrinthine routes to allow long standing practices to continue. They only react to demands for special measures when they have to, for instance when an ever-growing goose population all but destroys the early bite for cattle or when the white-tailed sea eagle, which they re-introduced without asking anyone, takes off the lambs and reduces even further already low lambing percentages. And they never explain their decisions, or if they do it is complicated by reference to European Directives, legislation from a Westminster Parliament, obscure financial guidelines and even more obscure scientific arguments.
- Seen from these perspectives it is very easy for anyone, either resident or visitor, or indeed living in Edinburgh, to believe truly that man is the endangered species and the environment and environmentalists have taken over.

Another perspective

- Man may well be the endangered species but for quite different reasons.
- Let's look briefly at crofting agriculture: now quote figures on the change in the number of active crofters, the number of people employed in crofting, the number of families directly supported by crofting. **[Lesley to provide]**
- Let's look at hill farming in general which is so significant in the Crofting Counties. Without very considerable support **[quote figures for Ewe Premium, Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances, suckler cow premium]**, the income and expenditure account for any household would likely be in the negative.
- New jobs of course are emerging for instance in the fish farming industry but we all know it has undergone a significant period of restructuring. Jobs are emerging in tourism but they tend to target the female population, and to be intensely seasonal so far.
- Overall sources of support will decline in the future once the cushion of Objective 1 status is replaced by a new scheme. Perhaps more important funding is not targeted properly. None of you who are practising crofters and farmers get paid properly for your environmental work, you are still paid largely to be food producers whether the market requires it or not. Major development at single sites has proved to be a benefit fallacy, boom and bust cycles are well known and indeed our Minister is something of an expert on that. Because of the marginal economics of farming in the crofting counties we are seeing undermanagement of land and in a few places abandonment: I am sure that saddens all of you just as it saddens the much maligned environmentalists who wish land to be managed to yield the wildlife and landscape benefits. And yet in some parts of the area there clearly is not enough land available for those who wish to carry out crofting agriculture.
- We are quite clear that the system of wildlife and landscape protection is not human friendly. Imposed solutions from Brussels and Strasbourg, Westminster and Whitehall, Edinburgh and Fraser Darling House are neither comfortable to

you nor comfortable to us. We badly need new approaches and I have every hope that the new Government will allow these to be brought into practice. So far we have done what we can within the very limited flexibility which exists within the system: that is not an excuse - it is a fact.

- So my conclusion, and I hope yours, has to be that it is not the battle of development versus environmentalists but rather (as the theme of this conference suggests) the key words are “and” and “integration”. That is the essence of the best environmental thinking in the north, in Scotland as a whole, and indeed throughout the developed world, by those who have understood fully the importance of crofters and farmers and local communities in being the guardians and custodians of the environment for their own benefit now and for the benefit of future generations. That if you like is the simple definition of the important philosophy of environmental “sustainable development” which we are glad to see that the new Government, and especially our Minister for Agriculture, the Environment, Forestry and Fisheries is enunciating and seeking to put into practice.

Real signs of hope

- None of us should despair, as there are real signs of hope and also major opportunities.
- Lack of control over the land resource has been seen by many generations as the greatest social ill and economic impediment in the Crofting Counties. But surely there are signs of hope with the Assynt and Borge crofters in the vanguard, followed now by the Eigg Community Trust and the hopeful outcome of negotiations at Armadale and Duntulm [**check please**]. Many of you realise the awesome responsibilities which ownership of land brings but you are not on your own as there is strong support from Government and all of its agencies and I applaud the establishment of the Community Land Support Unit in Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

- Changes in support to agriculture are at the heart of the future of the crofting way of life. The advent of Environmentally Sensitive Areas and, more recently, the Countryside Premium Scheme gives hope for proper support for your environmental stewardship role. However, despite our best efforts and those of officials in the Agriculture Department, much remains to be done. Artificial ceilings have been imposed which block initiative. Menus have proved to be inflexible and do not cover many of the environmental management interests which SNH and crofters jointly face. There is no recognition, as yet, of the different needs of different parts of the Crofting Counties even within individual ESAs such as Argyll and the Islands; so it is no surprise that budgets under the ESA Scheme have been consistently underspent. Surely that is not something that any of us in this room wants. Surely our joint task is to help officials and the Minister devise new schemes which enable you to respond flexibly, with us, to different circumstances: schemes to help beneficial management for the corncrake, schemes to overcome the loss of lambs to white-tailed sea eagles, schemes to find a more palatable and tolerable compromise between protected geese and livestock rearing. Are you prepared to join with SNH in working out detailed plans and prescriptions to submit jointly to the Minister and his officials so that we can move forward?
- it is often claimed that tourism is the fastest growing industry in the world. We know from the statistics compiled for the Scottish Tourist Board that tourism income to Scotland is growing all the time. But the trick for the Crofting Counties has to be to ensure that the benefits come to and stay in the local communities. This is surely where wildlife tourism provides opportunities. You are the people, after all, who look after the corncrake, who house birds of prey on your land, who provide sustenance for protected geese and many other species which are still not at a level of biological viability. But what benefits do you get? SNH, and RSPB, have worked together, often with the CSU, to develop ideas but now is the time to put them into practice to benefit you. Why not have hides on your field and visitors paying a fee to use them, with the money going to you to help your management? Why not have video cameras linked to a viewing area in an old byre where again the public can pay for the privilege of seeing sea eagles eating rabbits on Coll? Why not charge the wildlife tourism operators for coming onto

your land to see wildlife? Surely all of these are opportunities. We know that these are not necessarily full-time jobs in themselves, but they are opportunities to supplement your income, ideally suited to the crofting lifestyle which has wisely never put all its eggs in one basket. And there are many more ideas which we ought to be putting jointly as proposals to the Tourism and the Environment Task Force. We put some of these ideas to Brian Wilson the Minister of Tourism when he chaired his first meeting of the Scottish Tourism Co-ordinating Group at our headquarters in Edinburgh last month.

- The greatest sign of hope I detect, once I get out of my Edinburgh eyrie, is the growing confidence in communities around the Highlands and Islands. I recognise that some are perhaps near to despair, but many others, particularly I notice on this island, have turned the corner and as we all know: with confidence comes success. If we can change from that most fundamental BSE culture of blaming someone else to taking life into our own hands, and by that I mean the SCU and SNH, then surely there is a way forward?

We have proved we can do it

- There are many initiatives which SNH has been able to take within the strictures imposed upon us which have brought benefits not just to the environment but to those, like yourselves, who manage it. Take for example the Peatland Management Scheme in the Flow Country of Caithness and Sutherland. Here we have brought on boardlandholders coveringacres and providing funding of per annum. You may say that that is all window dressing; but remember - maintenance of existing management is critical but we have to have surety, and more particularly the European Commission requires surety that this will continue and not be subject to change as a result of perceived but not always realistic commercial opportunities.
- We have made it quite plain that we support cattle in the crofting counties. I hope you are all aware of our Western Isles Cattle Initiative, just as we are aware of the longer term implications of BSE. We recognise that it is labour intensive

compared with current sheep management practices, and we acknowledge that the crofting lifestyle has changed to a much more part time activity. Nevertheless, we should be jointly lobbying for greater support for cattle because they are a natural part of crofting agriculture and an intrinsic part of the management of the habitats in the Crofting Counties which bring benefits to wildlife and therefore to visitors and hence to you.

- Take for example the Skye Grassland Corncrake Scheme which has been very well received and puts £10,000 per annum into the local economy. Interestingly, this scheme is not just about the Corncrake. It is about supporting thousands of species, including the human one on which the others depend. These grasslands support a myriad of plants and animals which depend on the active management of these fields. We have been encouraged to hear both locals and visitors genuinely enthusing the beauty of these hayfields in the summer. Memories of childhood days long gone, you might say but we would also suggest they are a modern attraction for the tourist which shouldn't be ignored. And who would have predicted 20 years ago that it would be a natural heritage organisation which reinstated the cropping grant?! Take also our Crofting Demonstration Projects at Garros on Skye and at Skerra on the north mainland coast. **[Lesley to provide details]**
- Take also our joint initiative with SCU the Township of the Year Award, £5,000 per annum, which has been very well received. I am not at liberty to announce this year's winner, but it is inspiring to see fine examples and the sense of community pride in the townships which win and indeed those which enter the competition.

Is this the common ground?

- Is our common ground, therefore, wanting to sustain rural communities through their long-term stewardship of the environment and its use for their and their successors' benefit? Surely that has to be our joint goal.
- So what should be the shared agenda?

- A new, more people-friendly system for protecting the special areas of wildlife and landscape interest to be delivered through the Scottish Parliament at an early date.
- A system of agri-environment measures which reward at sensible levels, and flexibly, your stewardship of the land, across the crofting counties, not just for the “special areas”, paying you for your environmental as well as your food production roles.
- Making sensible and responsible use of your local wildlife resource for the enjoyment of visitors and for the financial benefit of local communities through targeted projects.
- Skewing the livestock regimes of the Common Agricultural Policy to benefit cattle and to reduce sheep where they are causing environmental damage.
- Continuing to improve housing but having designs which fit in with the landscape, recognising local character but at the same time providing modern habitation.
- Bringing more people effectively into decision-making about their environment.
- We live in a new era where radical agendas are the order of the day. Let us actively cultivate together the common ground to benefit livelihoods, lifestyles and the environment. One thing is certain: if we fail to cultivate that common ground, we shall all miss out on the opportunities which are out there. There is only a limited pot of money to go round and there are many interested and well organised groups with their eyes on it. We need to be well organised and working to a common agenda to succeed. But succeed we shall - if we put our collective minds to it.

