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CONSERVING SCOTTISH MACHAIR
A' DÌON MACHRAICHEAN NA H-ALBA

CROFTING AND THE MACHAIR

A short explanation about the machair on the Uists, the abundant wildlife it hosts and the vital part crofting plays in maintaining this unique working landscape



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HISTORY OF CROFTING

Crofting is the main agricultural system in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The history of crofting is long and complicated. A landmark was the passing of the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act (1886), a key feature of which was the introduction of security of tenure for crofters. Before this Act, and even after it was passed, there was a great deal of agitation and concern over the ability of landowners to remove people from the land, either forcing them to emigrate or take up smaller, less productive land holdings elsewhere.

A croft is a small agricultural unit which is usually a tenancy, but is sometimes owner occupied. In addition to the in-bye land allocated to each croft, all crofters have a share in the common grazings of the township. A croft is not the house in which the crofter lives, it is the land which he or she occupies. A croft was also once wittily described as “a small area of land entirely surrounded by regulations”.

Making a living from crofting has always been a challenge. Crofts were never really designed to provide anyone with a full living, and in many cases were kept purposefully small to ensure the landlord could depend on the inhabitants as a workforce. The average size of crofts in Uist is 4 - 6 ha, and nowadays even more than in the past, crofters tend to make their living through alternative employment, such as fishing, working off-shore etc. Despite the limitations of crofting, it is a challenge readily accepted by communities. In the past, crofters often worked together to complete tasks and a healthy rivalry and real pride existed in the produce which each croft achieved.

Crofting is based mainly on livestock rearing, with crops grown for winter feed. The low intensity of this grazing/arable system has many benefits for wildlife. Some of the in-bye fields around each croft are used for grass production, and cut as grass silage. Other fields are grazed by cattle and sheep.



THE MACHAIR

Machair is a rare, bio-diverse coastal grassland with a total global area of just 19,000ha – 70% of which occurs in Western Scotland mostly on the offshore islands. Machair forms when sand with a very high shell content is blown landwards by the prevailing westerly winds, creating a fertile low-lying plain. Shell sand is calcareous – lime rich. It sweetens the peaty soil of the islands while facilitating drainage and warming in the spring. Although bleak through winter, the machair is transformed during summer into a spectacular floral display alive with insects and birds.

The rich variety of flowers on machair areas includes wild carrot, wild pansies, bird's foot trefoil, lady's bedstraw, thyme, white clover, yarrow, long-headed poppy, corn marigolds, ragged robin, spotted and marsh orchids - which in turn lead to a diverse range of insects including the rare and protected great yellow bumblebee.





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The machair also supports a huge number of breeding waders such as dunlin, ringed plover, lapwing, oystercatcher and redshank. It is also home to the increasingly rare corn bunting and in spring and summer the secretive corncrake. The corncrake spends the winters in Africa arriving in the Uists to breed from late April onwards. Initially they choose the early cover of Iris beds or nettle patches but migrate into areas of crop once it has grown sufficiently high. The female can raise several broods a year, well into harvest time, so crofters ensure they cut crop in a 'corncrake friendly' manner - ie mowing from the centre out, or end to end - allowing the chicks time to escape through the cover of standing crop.

CROFTING TODAY

Crofters raise both cattle and sheep which are usually sold on for fattening to the mainland. To provide winter fodder for cattle much of the Uist machair is cultivated for 'corn'. These cereals, small black oat, rye and bere barley are locally adapted seed mixtures ideally suited to the growing conditions on the Hebrides. Bere (pronounced 'bear') as Britain's oldest variety of cereal is a valued heritage seed now only grown on the Western Isles, Shetland and Orkney.

The traditional system of two years cropping followed by two or three years of fallow is still commonly practiced. This allows perennial plants to develop on the fallow land, many of which are rare or declining nationally. Cattle's hooves poach the ground in winter and the dips and hollows made are used by ground nesting birds in the spring. Historically stock would have been moved to common or hill grazings in the summer but this custom is in decline.

Land to be cultivated is often fertilised by seaweed, a kelp species (*Laminaria* sp.), known locally as 'tangle'. Large quantities are washed up by the winter storms and collected fresh from the beach when the winds and tides allow. Seaweed is then left in piles for several weeks to decompose which concentrates the nutrients and reduces its volume for spreading.



Rotten seaweed is spread on the machair during late winter/early spring before it is cultivated. Crofters have been encouraged to rotavate or shallow plough their land which helps prevent soil erosion and also ensures wildflower seeds are not buried too deeply to germinate. Seaweed helps to bind the sandy soils and its use allows for a wide range of arable and fallow wildflowers to grow because they are not engulfed by more vigorous plants boosted by artificial fertiliser.

Corn crop can be harvested in several ways on the Uists, however it is usually either cut early as silage, before the seed has ripened, or harvested later for making stacks and seed. Seed when allowed to ripen provides a



more nutritious cattle feed. Later harvesting benefits wildlife as it allows ground nesting birds time to fledge their young and arable plants to flower and set seed. In certain places, especially on Benbecula and South Uist crofters still make corn stacks. The traditional method for making stacks has been handed down through generations. The finished style varies but every stack starts with the standing of sheaves of corn that have been cut and tied into small bundles or 'stooks', usually this is done with the aid of a reaper binder. These are then made into mini stacks or 'toiteans' and left to dry before being built up to form the final stack which can be up to four metres high. This is then covered by a net, often weighted down by stones, to protect it from the wind. The sheaves are either fed out to cattle over the winter (and by default to seed eating birds), or threshed for seed to be sown the following spring.

THE FUTURE

Crofting today faces many challenges. Employment opportunities on the islands are limited, leading to a loss of younger people seeking work on the mainland. Subsidies and grants do little to help support such small scale farming so there is no financial incentive to stay. It is imperative for the future of crofting to make it viable. Increased tourism has helped boost jobs but more are needed to enable a younger generation to remain on the islands and preserve their rich cultural heritage. Crofting is on the school curriculum and initiatives in place to set up a crofting course on the islands allowing both school leavers and others to gain further qualifications and to learn, amongst other things, the unique skills needed for Uist crofting.

Other issues crofters face includes the increasing greylag goose population which in late summer can decimate a corn crop within hours by stripping the seeds and flattening the field. Recent crop protection schemes have proved successful but if funding for further goose management is insufficient this may lead to more crofters silaging and 'black bagging' their corn in July to secure their winter fodder, which may have negative effects on machair wildlife. Other factors such as coastal erosion, the difficult weather conditions and increased fuel costs also threaten the future of crofting.



Recent media coverage has showcased the unspoilt beauty and diversity of wildlife to be found on these islands, but it is the people - generations of crofters who have farmed in harmony with nature - that have preserved and enhanced a rare and special landscape for us all to enjoy.

“One of the biggest threats to the machair is the loss of crofting. Many people think that when you have areas rich in nature you just let nature get on with it – the machair is completely the opposite. The machair really benefits from the crofting system.” Jamie Boyle RSPB Reserves Manager Uists



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Conserving Scottish Machair LIFE+ Project Layman's Report - Booklet 1/3

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