ResULTS project: case study Ca, interview 213

Face to face interview with environmental actor, conducted 14/3/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

I What do you mean by resilience?

R Resilience in what? In viability, the system, presuming it’s viability economically, viability socially, viability environmentally?

I We’re trying to cover all of those. I think that’s the challenge of this project, different people have looked at different aspects of it but as far as I know nobody’s tried to stick it all together. We’ve got three definitions of resilience that we’ve found, one is people who are able to absorb the change that’s happening, another is that they might make some small changes, it could be that they change when they leave the land ungrazed, that comes under adaptation, or it could be they do something quite radically different like opening a camp ground, or some might look at energy generation that kind of thing.

We’ve got a diagram that shows how we’re thinking about the food system. You’ve got the input providers, provide feed and fencing and all these things, you’ve got the crofters and the farmers, then you’ve got the marts, wholesalers, retailers, consumers, so that’s the food chain. Then we’ve got all the biological organisms that are involved, the sheep and the cattle. Then we’ve got associated bodies that are within that supply chain, insurance companies, banks, extension services, all that kind of thing, who are really very important to the whole chain. Then we’ve got other stakeholders who either affect this system or are affected by it, so environmental organisations or energy producers or government agencies. We’re trying to understand this whole system, to look at where are the trade-offs, where are the tipping points and trying to understand those kinds of decisions looking at going forward. Does that make sense to you?

R Sort of, yes. When you talk about tipping points, it depends what you mean as well, which tipping point, the whole crofting farming system here is, it’s not a viable system without large amounts of government money coming in. The tipping point for me in that system is that when do we realise that the farming system as it is at the moment won’t survive without huge amounts of government money coming in. For us particularly working for environmental organisation, we would say we should really look at that in a different way and say the crofters should maybe see it as they’re producing a wildlife spectacle or keeping areas very wildlife rich. Some of the last areas in Britain that’s got really rich farmland still with big biodiversity interest, and should the government be recognising that in a bigger way than it is at the moment so that the people are, the value of the land for what people produce here is tiny. We would see that is a major potential new agricultural systems in that systems like this, low input, high wildlife systems should be recognised and there should be more of an input in pushing that when the grant systems are given out.

I How will that change what people do?

R What you’ve got at the moment is a system that people are trying to produce… For instance, what’s happened out here in the last 30, 40, 50 years maybe, is that people have been encouraged to improve their stock, or so-called improvements. By improvements what they mean is that they’ve brought in Continental animals, which made higher inputs, made better land, both sheep and cattle, and we’ve got a system now where the crofters are producing a better animal in terms of meat production and things like that. But is that really what we want out here? It’s higher inputs, also the thing that drives the crofting system here in a way is what the buyers want as well, so it’s not just the constant push to improve animals and things like that but it’s also that the buyers want animals that put on meat quickly.

I Could be because they’re all going to be store animals?

R Yes, all store animals. The buyers dictate what the people have, what stock they have here, to a certain degree anyway. Traditional animals for instance, which have got much more lower inputs, better for grazing, a lot of the ground we’ve got out here is rougher ground, but get very poor prices at the sales.

I So that would be the Highland cattle and the Hebridean sheep?

R Yes, Highlands, shorthorns, all of the sort of traditional breeds, even Luing, even Aberdeen Angus to a certain degree. But the buyers are not interested in those animals because they don’t put on weight quickly enough.

I If you were paying crofters to manage the land for wildlife biodiversity, what would you ask them to do?

R The agri-environmental schemes that we’ve got at the moment are good, there’s a few niggling problems with them but I would put much more into them. The single farm payment and things should be linked into these systems, even [inaudible] and things like that. At the moment say for most crofts I would estimate that up to two-thirds of the money coming in is one form or other government grant. Sale of [inaudible] animals I would think is between a quarter to maybe a third of the income for that croft. Agri-environmental schemes are maybe making up 25% of that payment as well for the average crofters. But I’d like to see more emphasis being put on…

I If they got paid more for doing the agri-environmental schemes? So maybe 80% of the payment for that?

R At the moment it’s put forward that everybody’s entitled to the single farm payment, and you don’t have to do much about it at all. We think it would be far better if that was linked into environmental, in this type of system out here, and then crofters would get good income, they’d be able to keep the system going. It’s really important the farming system out here for the wildlife, it’s the one big link, really important, without the farming system here, without the low-intensive farming system that we still have, is to knock the pressure off that low-intensive system.

I What’s the advantage of the agriculture? What would happen if it disappeared?

R Some of the really important species are closely linked to keeping cattle, so we’d lose a huge part of… If you took the main species, things like corncrakes for instance are one of the rarest species that we have and one of the few species that are classed as being endangered in Western Europe in fact. It’s really closely linked to crofting, and keeping the cattle.

I Is that because of the grass?

R Yes, it’s because of the system, people growing winter feed. Corncrakes like the grass fields, and just the general keeping of cattle turning the place up, there’s a much bigger variety of vegetation in crofts rather than just keeping sheep, which tend to keep the area quite grazed continuously. So the cattle, and not just corncrakes, things like even the machairs here are famous for their breeding waders, we’ve got some of the highest densities of breeding ground-nesting waders, and really closely linked to cattle keeping and cropping systems and things.

I Is that linked to also the grain crop?

R Yes. That whole system of producing winter feed is a low-intensive winter feed system, one cut silage, one cut [inaudible], spring crops. There’s few places in Britain now where we’ve got one cut areas and low-intensive systems.

I I think there is an impression generally, not necessarily here, that farming’s bad and we should get rid of it. I hear the environmentalists say we actually need, both in [area C] and in [area 20], we need the crofters and the farmers to be doing what they’re doing but I’m never quite clear on what are the critical things that they do that really make that difference for you.

R The system that they’ve got, these low-intensive systems of producing arable crops, producing grass crops, cattle management, are ideal for a whole host of species. You could intensively, it’s just because of our low-intensive system, I suppose you could have a really intensive system where you’re producing crops and cattle but this one cut system is really good for wildlife.

I If you were wanting to devise a scheme specifically for [area 20], you had *carte blanche*, you didn’t have to have single farm payments, you could have whatever you wanted, how would you design something like that?

R I would probably loosely base it around the way the agri-environmental scheme is run, but I’d make a few big changes in that scheme in that you couldn’t pick and choose which bits you put into the scheme, if you put your farm in your whole farm must go in. There is a cash incentive to keep traditional cattle but it’s nowhere near what it costs, the extra costs, and it’s not much of an incentive at all at the moment because the actual payment people get they then lose that at the sales when they come to sell the calves. So it means nothing, so I would greatly increase that.

I So you’d see that it’s not just the grazing, you lose grazing by native breeds?

R Yes, native breeds. Native breeds are sort of, some people say the Continental breeds you could get them grazing the rougher areas and things like that, but from what I’ve seen once people get Continental cattle here people are trying to get the bigger cows as they can. There’s a real tradition and pride in the islands for producing good cattle, and we’ve got a few… When you go to the sales the people who get the best prices for their calves are people who have got Simmental and Limousin animals, and there’s a big prestige to that.

I Does that mean then that some of the rougher areas are not being grazed any more?

R What we’re seeing is that the hill ground is not used at all any more, in some areas anyway. Say for this village here, this village runs right the way down from [area 29], the hill is hardly used at all, so people have just stop using it. What really happened is that the inbye areas and the machairs are more intensively managed than they ever were in the past, because people used to move all their animals out that have relatively recent times, it’s 40, 50 years that the crofts were being cleared of animals, apart from tethered animals. All the animals being put on the hill and that doesn’t happen any more.

I And you feel that that would be of benefit, both for the hill and to the machair?

R I think it would be a massive benefit. Some areas are still fairly traditional for the machair management, and they do clear the machairs in the summer, but some areas now have halved the machairs and they cultivate one half and graze the other half. That’s slight intensification, it just means they can keep more animals, on more and better grazing.

I I get the impression quite a lot of it gets ploughed up?

R Yes it does. So in the past, everybody’s got the shares of their own rotation cropping here, so everybody ploughs an area for two years and then they move on to another area. Traditionally the area that was being ploughed for two years is left fallow for the following two years and then ploughed, these types of rotations. What would happen in the past, and it still does happen in some villages, like these villages around here, is that all the animals are moved off that area because the crops and the fallow areas are next to each other anyway so they couldn’t graze. But some townships are now half the machair, so they say all the crop doesn’t cultivate on one side for two years. There’s obviously quite a lot of areas that go uncultivated as well, and then the animals move to the other side for the summer. It’s just a slight intensification.

I You also said you wanted the whole farm in rather than just parts of it, can you expand on that a bit?

R With the present agri-environmental scheme that you can pick and choose which fields you put in. You get more points the more you put in, and it’s competitive, but say you wanted to go into the scheme and you put half your land in but you think I’ve got a grass field here that I can possibly cut early and take two cuts off, so I don’t want to put that into the scheme. So they might keep that out because the payment’s not enough for them to put it in, whereas…

I How does that then affect the birds?

R That’s just disastrous for both breeding waders and corncrakes. If fields are cut twice ia season they can’t survive, and that’s why they’ve gone from the rest of the country. The majority of people out here are one cut.

I What are the waders that you’re particularly concerned with?

R This area is particularly famous for, the six common species of waders found in the machair here are found in higher densities anywhere in Western Europe nesting underground. It’s lapwing, redshank, snipe [inaudible] plovers, they’re not particularly rare birds in their own right but they’re really what makes the machair system here. The islands here benefit, we get incredible dense populations of breeding birds because we have very few ground predators, things like foxes and stoats don’t occur here, so the birds can nest in higher densities. But they are reliant upon the area being grazed, and cultivation helps them as well. There’s a massive link between the farming and wildlife here.

I The concept of rewilding doesn’t really resonate?

R No it doesn’t really. Rewilding, the concept here would be very different from the mainland areas I would imagine, it is very different. It would be interesting what would actually be on, if you rewilded the machairs and stopped farming, it would be really interesting to see what survived on them because I think we’d see a massive reduction in, particularly bird interest. Certainly for the machair areas, rewilding wouldn’t do much good. As for the hill ground, certainly the east side of the island could very easily be covered in trees. Actually the east side of the island is hardly used at all any more by most crofters, there’s a few areas are still used but the majority of it’s not grazed by crofters at all any more.

I Do you know why?

R I think people just don’t put their animals out there. Big flocks of black-faced sheep and things like that have gone from the islands, people have gone for more Suffolk and Cheviots and they’re keeping them on the inbye. My son’s got a campaign on, he’s very into farming, he’s just come out of Agricultural College, and he wants to put sheep back on the township hills here.

I Is he getting much uptake?

R He’s getting some interest, he’s not here full time but he says when he comes back full-time he’s going to try and put 1500 black face out on the hill.

I I guess you have to have a few people joining together to make that work?

R You probably would. The other thing for the islands, to say resilience of the crofting system, the crofting system’s not very resilient at all because in my view, and the crofting system was set up as a subsistence system, which was very good in its time, people had their own parcel of land. It’s changed over time, very few full-time crofters here and very few people have got other jobs, so they’re not so reliant on the crops. But what’s happened with the crofting system is that people are being allowed to fence off all their individual areas whereas in the past, still some of the machairs have open ground and people have got [inaudible] where you’re allowed four cows [inaudible] machair for each croft, and 12 sheep or whatever. Whereas the inbye areas have all been fenced, so you’ve got dozens of fences between 25 and 50 metres across, strip fencing, probably more fencing out here than anywhere else, I couldn’t imagine anywhere in the world could have as much fencing per square kilometre as we have.

It’s just not sustainable, it’s not only not sustainable but it’s actually backfired against the crofters as well in that fencing’s incredibly expensive and you’ve got a lot of people hanging on to crofts here, families who have had crofts in the family all their life, and the sons have gone off to live on the mainland, not particularly interested in [inaudible] So you’ve got semi-abandonment although they’ll say my neighbour can use the croft. Because of the fencing system it makes things really difficult.

I One of the things that’s taken off down south is this idea of mob grazing, where you do have a lot of temporary fencing and you graze something intensively and let the other things grow. Is that something that’s appropriate here?

R Probably not. I would think that because we’ve still got the fencing in, if it was my view I would rip all the fencing out each township and I would just have, I’m assuming that you’re allowed, each areas have their grazing dates on it. Like the townships, they’re all machair, it’s got a grazing date between, we’ve got animals grazing down there from 15 October to 15 May, and each croft, there’s 22 crofts in this village, you’re allowed four animals and 12 sheep.

I And then empty in the summer?

R Yes, then it’s empty.

I Is that the empty period that really benefits the waders?

R It’s fantastic for the waders, yes, and that’s when people cultivate down there as well. So people cultivate the [inaudible] large areas are uncultivated and just left. That’s why the machairs are particularly famous for wild flowers because they have a four month over the summer period where there’s no grazing. Botanically and for the wildlife there that relies upon not long vegetation or just no grazing.

I Do you run the nature reserve?

R [Inaudible] Nature Reserve is very different, because it’s all crofted. It’s a funny type of nature reserve in that we’ve actually got no land there at all, and we’re there completely at the courtesy of the local crofters. We’ve set up an agreement with four crofting townships, there’s about 40 crofters across, and we do have individual agreements with some of the crofters but by no means all. We spend a lot of time getting the crofters in to the agri-environmental schemes, so we write the plans and we’ve got a visitor centre there so we attract tourism in.

So it’s a big thing, we push to say that people are coming to see the wildlife on the ground and wildlife tourism potential is big. Things that you see on the campsite, the campsite just opened up on the reserve a few years ago, so it’s trying to show that… The reserve’s very important to us, if we moved off the reserve tomorrow, the management of the reserve possibly won’t change at all or very little, but our main aim for a reserve is to show that the wildlife’s a natural asset to these islands. Slight changes in crofting or just following the agri-environmental plans, you can have corncrakes, waders, and you can have crofting as well, a good healthy crofting system.

I Do you find people are on the whole open and amenable to that kind of approach?

R Yes, very. Up until recently just about every crofter was in the agri-environmental schemes. That’s changed slightly because the government cut back the payments and some crofters are not going into the scheme. This is the first time in 25 years I’ve come across people who are not particularly willing to go into the agri-environmental schemes. The majority are still going in but some of the younger crofters are not.

I You’ve obviously got the reserve that’s really good for birdlife, does that extend out to the other crofters?

R Yes. There’s three of us work on the islands here, and we work just across the islands. The main aim across the islands is to try and get as many people into the agri-environmental schemes as we can.

I Dare I ask you what you think about the geese?

R Geese are an agricultural problem. There’s two things here, one is the greylag geese, which are a problem for people crofting, and they are a big problem, the population is too big now for the agricultural system. You talk to the crofters, a lot of crofters said they blame the reserve settlement on [area 23] to protect geese because greylag geese, very few native greylag geese are bred in this country, it’s one of the few areas [inaudible] native greylag geese, most of our greylag geese come from Iceland in the winter. So they’re a specially protected bird, so the crofters blame that for the massive rise in the goose numbers here over the last 30, 40 years.

Protection maybe helped a wee bit but the biggest change with the geese came because people improved big areas, the inbyes and reseeds have created no end of food for these geese. So the geese have got incredible survival rates over the winter and are in fantastic condition because they’ve got all the best grass, and they produce a lot of chicks. The population’s far too big now. Having a huge goose population creates huge problems in keeping the machair cultivation systems going.

I Does that and then affect the other birdlife as well?

R Yes, it has a knock-on effect. We’ve actually got a big knock-on effect just now because people are desperate to cut the corn as soon as they can, as soon as it’s ripe they want to cut it, which has a knock-on effect because for us, for things like corncrakes, the longer that corn’s on the ground the better.

I The corncrake, does it like grass or corn or either?

R It predominantly nests in grass fields along the edge of cornfields, but the youngsters and the adults late on, they go down into the corn just as cover because all the grass has been cut. So the corn’s actually really important for them as well. Some of them do nest right down the machair as well once they’ve grazed and been off the machair for a long time the grass comes up in [inaudible] and they’re nesting around there as well. So they’re right on the edge of the corn. Very occasionally they do nest in the corn but only if it’s been undersown with the grass crop normally.

I Apart from too many geese, what do you see as the predominant threats to maintain the birdlife?

R Maintaining crofting. By far the biggest threat, if croft then becomes non-viable, if the government decided that the agricultural grant system wasn’t sustainable and decided to cut that grant system. I think even cutting things like the agri-environmental scheme awards, although it’s only 20-25% of people’s income it would make a huge difference to the crofter here because a lot of it’s just on the edge of viability and for… My wife’s from the islands here, I’m obviously not, so my wife’s family’s got four crofts here and the income per croft per year is about between £4-5,000, that’s [inaudible] cattle and sheep, just small numbers of cattle and sheep, and as I say most of that comes from the grant. Nobody takes a wage out of that, and it just about covers the croft, covering the costs of having cattle and sheep and things. So it’s really just on the edge of being viable, it’s almost, the vast majority of crofters have all got full-time jobs and you hear a lot of them are just about breaking even.

I Why do you think people continue crofting when it’s…

R [Area Ca] is really good because there’s a real tradition and pride in crofting here. That’s what really fires crofting here. I think the ground here as well, because we’ve got a lot of machair ground, the machair ground can be relatively, can be abused for a long time and then brought back into good agricultural condition quite quickly. I think other areas, maybe [area 27] and [area 28] and places like that with not so much machair ground, they’ve lost big areas of ground, it’s been rush dominated and it’s really difficult to bring that ground back into agriculture without spending a lot of money. So their problem’s getting worse whereas ours is not, there’s still a very healthy system here.

I I certainly haven’t seen a lot of rushes now you come to mention it.

R There are in a few areas but nothing like [area 27] and [EW 28], areas like that are really poor.

I So what keeps the rushes away?

R I think if you’re maintaining your ditches and keeping grazing on your crofts, just looking after your croft. But once it gets semi-abandoned and ditches fill up, rushes start taking over.

I So drainage is a big part of maintaining the… Is there any balance between drainage and the birdlife?

R Yes, there is. But I think we’re in such a wet place, and we’re so low-lying, crofters are trying to drain everything out here for hundreds of years and I can’t see it ever… They have drained big areas but I can’t see any more drainage being successful without bringing in heavy machinery and pumping water out. It has benefited the birds in some areas because waders and things love damp ground to breed on, so big lock systems have been drained in some places where it’s created lovely wetland. You think most of the machair areas are less than two metres above sea level here, so it’s very difficult to completely drain places.

I Do you see climate change as a threat?

R It’s one of these big questions, potentially it’s a huge threat here because everywhere’s so low-lying. Knowing what can potentially happen and what might, you can’t say much more but it could just be… If incredibly stormy weather carries on out here with incredible downpours. The last few years have been so wet out here, it does make the crofting life far more difficult.

I Some people, not here but elsewhere, have said they can cope with one or two wet years but if it keeps going on after three or four you can’t cope with it. You’ve got the resilience for one year but not for six years or whatever it is. Is that the same here?

R I would say we’re much the same here, you can just see big areas start to be abandoned and it’s just not farmable any more.

I How does the storms that we’ve had, my arrival here was delayed because the ferries were cancelled but does that affect the birdlife at all?

R It doesn’t seem to affect the birdlife, the birds just get on with it. It affects the people but not the birdlife. But out here the people are very resilient as well to storms because it happens regularly.

I How does the relationship between the birdlife and the tourists, how does that work?

R There’s increasing numbers of tourists coming here for wildlife, particularly the birds. That is because, partly because we’ve heavily advertised the fact, we’re trying to push it as the birdlife’s got more of its natural assets here. But it’s very good, in fact we’re at the stage if we get too many visitors during the breeding season, May and June, it’s something we’ve got to manage. If we could spread the tourists out over the year it would be great, and you could certainly have a lot more tourists late summer into autumn and winter, but spring and summer because our birds are very vulnerable because they’re all ground-nesting birds so to increased disturbance. That’s the only real issue for me with tourists, but it’s great to see more and more people coming.

I Do you have people warning around disturbing birds?

R Yes, you do, and increasingly so. For some reason over the last four or five years we’ve had increasing numbers, massively bigger numbers of people with dogs coming, and that’s a much bigger problem. For a dog walker the machairs look fantastic places to run your dogs, these huge big open areas, but it’s a nightmare for the ground-nesting birds.

I How much education can you do?

R It’s difficult but we are now putting signs up, we never used to see signs on the islands here at all, and we’re putting more and more signs up asking people to control their dogs. It’s a problem not just for the wildlife but it’s actually turning into a problem for some of the crofters as well, sheep-worrying, which we’d never heard of until just a few years ago. All of a sudden there’s been a whole flurry of cases of sheep…

I Any idea why people are bringing their dogs over?

R I think it’s just… I don’t know, more and more people have dogs. I think campervans, the accommodation on the islands is very limited and a lot of accommodation didn’t allow dogs, guesthouses and B&Bs, but now campervans have come in and lots of people bring dogs in the campervan. It’s at least two- to three-fold the numbers of dogs in a four year period. It is huge. We put out dog-walking signs or keep dogs under control on the reserve two years ago.

I Do people pay attention to them?

R Most people do, yes.

I I guess they’ve come to see the birds rather than exercise their dogs.

R We can’t put signs up everywhere, every stretch of machair. The reserve area is not much different from the rest of the islands, they’re really rich in birds, so there’s a limit to how many signs you can put up.

I What about young people coming in? Obviously your son’s keen to come and be full-time here.

R I would like him to be full-time here but he’s actually going back up to the mainland. He’s just come back from New Zealand, he was shearing over in New Zealand.

I It used to be New Zealanders coming here to do the shearing.

R Yes, that’s right. There’s a bit of a lack of young people although there’s renewed, in [area 20] it’s looking a lot healthier than it was five or six years ago, and suddenly there’s a change in the owner-crofters have gone and there’s a few younger crofters coming in.

I Any idea why?

R No, not really. I don’t know why, we just seem to have got a batch of younger lads that are fairly interested in farming. There’s still a lack of opportunities for young crofters to get here because the older crofters hang on to their crofts forever, just like old farmers I’m sure, nobody wants to let go. That’s still a bit of an issue but if you asked me the same question five years ago I’d have said it’s just dire, all the crofters are over 70. There was a survey about five or six years ago and it was something about crofters with cattle, and it was something like 70% were over 65.

I It must be difficult to manage cattle after a certain age.

R Yes. I don’t know what the statistics are now but I would say it’s probably not anywhere near as bad because of the younger lot of crofters.

I Are they changing the way [inaudible]

R Do you know what I’ve found, I’ve been here 30 years now and with all the work we do education stuff as well, we go into schools and schools come to the reserve, so naively I thought that in 10 or 15 years’ time when some of these young pups become the crofters, I’ll find it much easier and they’ll be dead keen to take up the schemes. But I’ve actually found the opposite, and I found the young crofters I’m finding harder to convince because they seem to be, I suppose like all young people they’re looking for new ideas, they’re looking for ways of improving the ground, getting more bales, getting more animals, making more money. Whereas I didn’t have that with the older generation, they were sort of happy to tootle on and say yes, I can do that. So it’s sort of opposite to what I expected.

I Have they gone to Agricultural College and been taught how to…

R Quite a few of them, yes. The Agricultural College themselves say [inaudible] things like that, they’re often running courses on producing best grass, producing best silage, and nearly all of it entails intensifying a wee bit. So all these young crofters, it’s been the biggest shock to me in the last four or five years, I’m having to really fight… In fact I’ve got two young crofters on the reserve and they’re completely refusing to put their crofts into the agri-environmental scheme. They are still taking some management agreements with the RSPB itself but they see it as too restrictive, and not enough money. Whereas the father who I dealt with before was great.

I I’ve heard some people worry about the penalties if you don’t do it right as well, is that an issue?

R It’s not such an issue out here, but I’ve heard that in a lot of other areas where people have been quite badly fined. The Department seem to be quite relaxed on that. One of the things about the agri-environmental schemes is that they are far too complicated, and particularly grazing densities and things like that, trying to impose grazing densities on crofts is almost impossible. It’s tiny wee fields and like one and a half cows you’re allowed in this field or something like that, and it’s just ridiculous. But the Department actually are quite relaxed about that, they’re much more…

I They see the outcome rather than the [inaudible]

R Yes. But those systems, they really need to be simplified maybe for small units or something like that, get rid of the grazing element, be a bit more flexible, would help a lot.

I If you wanted to have a perfectly resilient [area 20], what would you want to put in place?

R For wildlife or the crofting and social system all around crofting, which includes quite a lot of culture as well. I would have a high-nature value farming system that was linked-in, the single farm payment [inaudible] but it was linked into one system if you are in these areas. This is what your payment’s [inaudible] like a giant agri-environmental scheme almost.

I So, have a high nature value scheme for here and a few other places?

R Yes, I think that’s a, it would have to be modelled to each area because each area is slightly different. Certainly the [inaudible] could easily have really good high-nature value system that’s flexible enough and putting enough money in to crofters to keep crofting viable, and keep a low-input system that attracts the young folk keen to produce. And the outcomes, maybe the outcomes are giving up breeding corncrakes on your ground along loads of waders so you can have really good, you can have nice traditional cattle. For that to happen, not only does the government have to do that but the government has to stop or has to influence the buyers. I don’t know how you could say traditional animals at the sales or something you’ve got to hire… We’re all into health and everything now so you’d think these traditional animals are far less fatty, something along the lines that there would be some premium.

I I did see on my drive round there was a food trail. What does that do, do you know?

R Yes that’s the Hebridean food trail for the smokehouses and things like that. It’s more fish and things like that. I think there are, [inaudible] Bakery and people like that are in it so they butcher their own animals and things like that. But that type of thing, with more emphasis on… It would have to be twofold, it would have to be the government [inaudible] influencing the [inaudible]

I Talking about the culture as well, partly that there’s a culture that goes with the crofting, but there’s also a culture of who’s got the best beast in the competitions. Can you envisage a culture embracing, I’ve got the most flourishing corncrake population?

R I think it’s harder, much harder. I certainly think it would take a massive turnaround, probably a step too far for, just from talking to young crofters, they would certainly [inaudible] say I’ve got the best Simmental heifer or whatever, they would certainly it would be easier to turn around and say I’ve got the best Shorthorn heifer or Highland heifer. You could do that but I think it might need something, when you come to selling that it’s like a stewardship thing that this fantastic heifer was produced on ground that’s also producing corncrakes, breeding waders and…

I So they have a nature sign on the meat as well?

R Yes, something like that. The government, we’ve lost massive areas of wildlife on the mainland now through intensive farming, and that’s what people think, we want cheap food so the farmers have produced exactly what we want, it just means that we lose all wildlife. Now we’re trying to get, or we hope the government has, we’re trying to get away from that slightly and that people are more conscious of the way animals are reared and what they’re eating.

I Have people got the skills to do that, to maintain the land in appropriate ways?

R Yes, they have. Because it would be relatively easy and it’s very close to the system, it’s just not taking two cuts, one year just taking one cut, probably fewer sheep in some areas and more cattle.

I There is quite a push to reduce meat eating, would you see that as a threat?

R No. Again, I think it would be easily done here. It’s just what, it’s trying to produce as much as they can producing good animals.

I So the animals that you eat would be the, of the high nature value area?

R I think these areas could really fit in with the government’s push on reducing meat intake and reducing the intake of fatty meats and things like that.

I One of the things that surprised me, thinking about the whole scheme of things is I hear very little about carbon sequestration as being part of the package, either in [area C] or [area Ca].

R It’s something that’s hardly mentioned at all.

I Any idea why?

R I don’t really, it’s just something that’s not really pushed out here. I’ve never seen it, is that pushed a lot in other areas?

I In academic literature carbon capture is seen as a very important thing. I think the science of it is a bit all over the place, but peatlands is seen as a chief area to maintain for carbon capture. I drive across [area 20] and it’s all peat, and I don’t understand why that’s not being seen as… I need to talk to people who understand peat, I don’t understand peat.

R The peat’s always just been there. It’s still seen as a resource here, so there’s probably quite a lot of resistance to… Things like moor burning is less than it used to be, there’s still big moor burns where people tend to light the heather and let it go.

I Is that a problem?

R It is, it’s a big problem for the use of peat and for carbon capture and things like that, degraded peat, and the fires often go down into the peat here. So it is seen as being a big problem, and it’s obviously wildlife-wise as well, depending when you do it, it’s not a very good thing at all.

I In [area C] people were telling me that they want people to continue moor burning because they kind of stopped and the result of which is lots of big wildfires. I think partly because they had a big one last year and that’s in people’s memory, but that’s not a concern [inaudible]

R There is that, if the heather does get big and rank but I suppose the [inaudible] the heather’s just a stage in the vegetation as well because the vegetation would have been very different on the island years ago, and there would have been a lot of tree clumps and things like that, so the heather would have been broken up by a lot of patches of vegetation. The islands, the east of the islands you could have potentially quite a lot of thick heather, but I don’t hear people complaining about that. There were a few big fires in [area 28] last year, you might be right people did say because the heather hadn’t been burned for a while because people were grazing it. I don’t know what the solution to that really is. I don’t particularly want them to burn it but…

I How significant is the moorland to birds?

R The moorland out here is, it’s fairly significant. The species of birds you get on the moor tend to be species that live in low numbers across big areas, so you’ve got to have huge areas of moorland to be significant to them. We do have things like big eagle populations here, most of them are on the moors or on the edge of the moor. Certainly nowhere near as significant as the machair and croftlands.

I Do you have any conflict between the eagles and the sheep farmers particularly?

R There’s a little bit, every year there’s stories come out about sheep massacring, and deer, eagles massacring sheep, then it dies down all of a sudden. But the papers love it, and it’s sensationalised. It’s one of these things I think there’s a tiny minority of crofters who are affected by eagles, eagles definitely take lambs, but all of a sudden these are shown… We’ve actually had a study on [area 24] a few years ago because there was big complaints down there. And that study in [area 24], like the one that was done on Mull and the one that was done on Wester Ross in the last 15 maybe 20 years, they’ve all shown exactly the same results, that eagles do take lambs but overall they account, in the areas where eagles are affecting lamb population they affect about 5% of the total losses of lambs in that area are down to eagles.

I And the other losses are being attributed to the eagles?

R Hypothermia and things like that were by far the biggest killer of any sheep, lambs or things like that. But eagles are easy targets, and they are scavengers, particularly sea eagles are real scavengers, so they pick up a lot. There are certainly cases in some areas, and there’s this one particular area on [area 20], the crofters have got very few sheep, they’ve maybe only got about 15-20 sheep on the crofts, and the crofts are surrounded by moorland they’ve got these little patches, probably four or five acres each that run along this little fertile valley, and it’s full of rabbits as well, and eagles constantly [inaudible] them. There’s a few crofters down there that are losing significant, they’re maybe losing 30% of their flock each year. It’s a small number of lambs, it’s maybe only seven or eight lambs but significant to them. So I think in places like that we should, and there is an eagle SNH scheme where if you’re affected, it’s mainly aimed at sea eagles. We should make sure that people don’t lose out.

I It’s good feed for the sea eagles [inaudible] population… Thank you for your time. Is there anything you’d like to say that you haven’t had a chance to tell me about?

R I don’t think so. The other significant things for the islands here, I was seeing your chart there and everything costs a fortune to get out here, so it’s whether the islands, the agricultural system is seriously hit by high costs of things. For me in a way, environmentally it works out for us quite well sometimes because it means that fertilizers are incredibly expensive here so it means that people are less likely, it’s probably helped the wildlife out here because it means that people are less likely to use a lot of fertilizer and try and cut fields two or three times in a season because of the high prices. But for other things it’s a real disadvantage for the crofters.

I Do people use pesticides much?

R Probably compared to the mainland areas, tiny amount. Under the agri-environmental schemes they’re not allowed to use pesticides, so it’s probably a very light use of it.

I Any issues around sheep dosing or cattle dosing?

R I don’t know about sheep dosing, but Ivermectin and Closamectin all used commonly out here, as is Spot-On and things like that. What effect it has we can’t really be sure, and if it has an effect. I think the machairs are so rich that the weight of population [inaudible] invertebrates and things like that. We’ve got eight cows, I would love not to use [inaudible] because you see the cow pats, sometimes the cow pats last about eight months in the field without breaking down. So it’s always in the back of my mind, thinking what effect is this having.

I Something is a magic solution to fluke.

R If somebody could find a good, especially this place is so wet that you could get away without using… I actually did, I didn’t use fluke for nearly two years but I lost two cows.

End of transcript