ResULTS project: case study C interview 200

Face to face interview with environmental organisation, conducted 25/2/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

I Thinking about the upland food system, we’ve got the food chain, the inputs, the crofters, the farmers and the processors, the marts, all the way down to the consumers, so that’s the food chain. We’ve also got all the biological organisms, the sheep and cattle, the trees and bugs. Then there are all the ancillary organisations, the advice extension agencies and so on, and then there’s a whole lot of other stakeholders who are more peripherally involved, but they also are affected by what happens. We’re trying to find out where are the important things.

R That’s a nice way of representing it as well, in terms of this is the key agricultural part of it and then these are the things that are the repercussions of that or the benefits in other ways. I think particularly for the sort of farming systems on [area C], this element of it, the biological organisms, may be or has the potential to be much more significant than some of the other elements. I can see that trying to illustrate this grammatically in these cognitive diagrams, the size of this sector could swell for some farms and crofts and maybe other bits diminished.

I That’s an interesting idea, to use size to try and capture things.

R Because I think that is one of the key things about our croft land, and certainly how it has been in the past and hopefully how it will be in the future. It’s the most high nature value farming system in the UK.

I Is that widely recognised?

R It’s widely recognised within our organisation and in the manner in which other systems like how we, our policy team and how we lobby government for agri-environment schemes and things. I think generally by politicians they do get that message that your small-scale mosaic of habitats and the way things are managed here that’s much more low intensity, is actually much better for wildlife and biodiversity generally.

I What does resilience mean to you?

R In terms of how well that system can survive, its resilience to all sorts of economic, climate and other pressures. I presume that’s what you mean.

I It’s interesting you use the word system, you see it very much as a system.

R I think the crofting, it is a system because it functions in quite a different way to a commercial farm enterprise. Most croft systems are not financially viable in themselves, it’s something additional to what other people do, and without the support there is from government I think most of it wouldn’t happen at all, it’s just a contribution towards helping these things continue.

So much of it is a way of life for these people. In a place like [area C], where you’re a long way removed from the centre of population, from your markets, where you’ve got climatic extremes to deal with, you can’t actually expect to have a high intensity system that’s going to be really productive and the whole intrinsic nutritive value of the soils and things is in many cases quite poor.

I We came up with three different ways in which systems can be resilient, the first is being able to absorb a lot of things, maybe it’s financial changes in terms of crofting but they can absorb quite a lot of losses and that’s been significant for them. The next thing is to start adapting, it might be building a barn so that you can finish a few sheep indoors or whatever it is. The third one is doing things a bit more radical so perhaps number two might be something like reseeding the grass or something like that, something that’s adapting but you’re basically still doing the same thing, but the transformation is actually doing something quite different. I think there are a number of people trying to finish lambs on the island now. In terms of system resilience, do you see any of these being particularly important?

R In terms of how the systems work on [area C]? I think that one is a challenge because they’ve already been stretched, their resilience has been tested climatically, over the last 30 years I think it’s got very much wetter, windier, extremes of dry and dampness, but generally much damper. From the starting point where we are now I think the resilience that’s there from that perspective could be stretched already.

I So there’s not a lot of capacity for more absorption?

R I would think that they would manage some but they would probably have to make changes to the systems that they’re operating. All of these things are a continuum over time, aren’t they? I don’t believe in this term traditional at all because that just relates to a particular era, because things have always evolved over time. I suppose the practices that went on the longest are maybe the ones they refer to as traditional.

For a while they were trying to improve the value of their stock and their ability to supply better meat by importing and cross-breeding with native breeds and going into Limousin and Charolais and all the rest of it, and that’s something that I think in some areas was challenging in our climate because the cross-breeds they ended up with were not as resilient themselves, they were much more likely to increase your vet bills. So I think there’s a lot of things like that that I suspect if they were stretched further in terms of climatic impacts they would have to revert back to more hardy native breeds than some of the systems they have just now.

I Do you see people doing some transformation, doing something quite different?

R There’s a few areas where that’s happening. In terms of actually growing things and all these polytunnels of [inaudible] and stuff like that, I think there is probably more scope for doing things like that on the island, and that’s the sort of protection from the weather. It’s hard to know at this stage how things might go because I think Brexit is going to have such a big impact. Part of that I think is psychological as well, I think people almost feel like giving up sometimes, and it depends what support comes along on the back of all these changes.

I Do you see people tapping into wildlife tourism?

R Not so much in an agricultural sense. I think it’s something that could be very effective being delivered on Uist because it’s such a rich and special place for wildlife. It’s something that, there was one example up in [area 13], the people at the [organisation 1] outdoor place, for a while they were diversifying into different things and with wildlife walks being part of that. I’m not sure it really took off that part of it, I don’t know why, but I don’t think they do that any more I think they stick more to the outdoor side of things.

On [area C] we’re in a situation where a lot of the richness, you still have the diversity but a lot of the richness within that diversity is beginning to disappear as wildlife generally is under a huge amount of pressure. If you turn the clock back to when the crofts were actually, say 60, 70 years ago the crofts were I wouldn’t say more intensive, they were managed, a lot of them were left to the elements, to pasture and to sheep now, and you’re ending up with systems that are reverting to a more acid situation. Back in those days crofters and farmers were regularly applying lime and slag to the land, and that actually is very good for the soil, for the invertebrates, for the earthworms and consequently for the likes of wading birds and things, the corncrakes and whatnot were so much more numerous then. But a lot of these things have actually declined over time, and there’s some serious declines going on just now which are really worrying. With waders, with what’s happening with the soil, with invertebrates generally, with a whole range of species.

I Do you think that’s largely tied up to the [inaudible]

R It’s a lot of things. It’s not an unfair question but I think it’s both a local thing and a global thing. I think the use of chemicals in agriculture is increased phenomenally in the last 70 years and I think that we’re beginning to see some of the effects of that. Chemicals in the environment generally have massively increased and I think that’s been huge effects on the invertebrates which are at the bottom of the food chain, and knocking on to everything above that, and will in fact impact on the health of the soil.

I [area C]’s got a lot of tourist, I’m interested that you don’t think there’s a lot of wildlife tourism that currently doesn’t have the resources that North Uist or Uist generally have.

R The bulk of wildlife tourism on [area C], is still I would say, not solely but I would say that a lot of it is marine-based, boats looking at ? sea eagles, otters. There is certainly some land-based and their interest is not so much focused on croft land though, a lot of them were on your moorland areas, upland areas, water bodies and things, but I think that’s because we’ve lost a lot of our most interesting and valuable farming species.

Things like lapwing have declined enormously [inaudible] I don’t think are breeding here any more, very few, we don’t have corn buntings any more, yellowhammers have declined, corncrakes are now only found in small parts of the northern peninsulas, most of the rest of the island doesn’t see corncrakes any more. While these have virtually disappeared in most areas, and some other species are seeing decline, curlew numbers have declined enormously but they tend to be more now on the rough ground and moorland edge rather than on farmland. It’s a broad range of species, and twite is another one which is becoming really quite scarce.

I When we think about resilience we want to maintain some kind of function. What is it that you’re trying to preserve? These are some ideas about the sorts of things that people have said these are things that we are resilient to, is there anything there that strikes you as being…

R Before we move on to that can I just mention this last one here about transforming and radical changes [inaudible]. Personally I’d like to see a lot more organic farming and less use of chemicals that are having I think detrimental effects which we all suffer from in the longer term. Organic farming, agri-tourism, I think these things and sensitive renewable use on a kind of almost within the family personal use. I think a lot could be done to reduce people’s cost of living here by better insulation of homes and the systems that they have that will conserve energy and use better the energy that is available to us. So I think by changing people’s living standards, and by that I mean just the manner in which they live in different ways, by changing those there’s potential for having more available cash to do more on the land as well.

I One of the questions I’ve asked some people is, how would you feel if the agricultural subsidies became subsidies for infrastructure, for housing, for roads, for internet, possibly subsidies for alternative energy, how would you feel about something like that?

R I think if we went down that route just now the land would be forgotten about altogether, because there would be too much focus on people’s actual housing and living and that side of things. You couldn’t dissociate it from the land. I think maintaining that connection, and I think it needs a sort of mind-shift in the population as well. People are very ready to build more houses, often on some of the best agricultural land, and have bigger flashier cars and whatnot, but that’s not tackling the problem, that’s actually creating more problems.

So I think it needs to have a complete change of thinking, to be much more reflecting on where people are now and how they’re living, and their understanding of what’s looming really in terms of climate change and the impact. I don’t think your average person has got any concept of what that might mean for them, but I think it’s something that people should be starting to think about now. I think governments should be doing an awful lot more now to increase our resilience in that respect.

[inaudible] to just suddenly switch resources from one to another, without setting the framework of what’s happening and why, why we’re doing this, so it’s not as if you can have two homes and profit from that in some way, whether it’s through tourism or whatever. There has to be more greening and climate credentials attached to that sort of climate change, that way of thinking, and people assessing their own homes, more opportunity to improve the situation locally in a fair and honest way, rather than it doesn’t seem like it’s done like that.

I I’m not aware that there’s a lot of organic agriculture in [area C].

R No, I think in [area C] they just go with the flow. It’s partly because crofting is something that’s done off the side of their desks for all bar a few, who are the bigger scale people who try to make a living out of it. Either way you look at it people are looking for short sharp fixes rather than taking an organic approach, which would perhaps reduce their yields and may involve more labour intensive means of achieving the same end point.

I It seems that if you’re doing extensive agriculture most people are not using so many chemicals.

R They’re not using so many chemicals but I’m not quite sure what the legal situation is. Things like dosing their cattle with Ivermectin, that is one of the most crucial things which is having an impact right across all of that land. You walk on a farm where there are cattle and for the most part cow pats these days will sit there for long enough and not break down because the whole, because of the chemicals that are in them, they’ve killed off all the invertebrates, and that goes right down into the soil and kills off soil invertebrates as well. It’s a really pervasive thing that is persistent in the environment, and it’s having much more damaging effects I think than people can perhaps measure, and maybe that’s part of it.

I That I can understand because people do dose a lot because of fluke.

R Again, I think that’s the sort of climatic thing. If they were to change their systems a bit so that, because historically they would always have a little byre that they would take their cattle in in the winter, it might be very small but they would only have one or two cattle, these were little cowsheds that have disappeared from the landscape largely but they were crucial as part of managing that system. Instead now generally they have them out all the time, or they have such a substantial herd of cattle that you get excessive poaching, which all the water that stands around them increases their chance of liver fluke etc. Whereas I think the way we managed in the past, in much more low intensity mosaic like habitats, a patch of this, a patch of that, was much better for managing those parasites and persistent pests.

I If you were to describe your absolutely perfect resilient system, what would it look like?

R I don’t know if it exists at the moment. I think in my view what I would like to see is rotational agricultural systems, much lower intensity with where you’ve got climatic extremes, where you have indoor facilities that can be used to protect animals during those times where appropriate for the species. I think using much more in the way of native breeds of cattle so that, thinking about birds when I talk about species, having cultivation within that system, low intensity without all of the chemicals and things, using more natural means.

Maybe I’m a bit too extreme but I think that we should be seriously looking at all the chemicals that are being used, even in our own foodstuffs and things it’s ridiculous. People’s health is not improving with time, we live longer but a lot of people aren’t healthier, or maybe it’s the generation that are coming along behind us because the obesity factor and the processed food thing.

I The idea was to try and understand what are the features that a resilient system would want to maintain. These are some suggestions, are there some of these that particularly resonate with you, or others that you think of that aren’t there?

R It’s interesting that you put biodiversity enhancement in public goods, which I guess is true… I’m thinking about it from a personal perspective rather than a personal business, so I can see why you say all of these things, but I think quality of life is key to all of these things. For most people I think that the environment plays a much bigger part in their quality of life than they realise, until they are in a situation where they are removed from it. If you speak to somebody in a city, in a flat with no windows that doesn’t have that connection with the environment, the way they look at this is completely different to somebody who’s been born and brought up in this area. So I think the quality of life is key to resilience, and the environment and having a healthy environment around you is key in that.

I In that quality of life, what else would you include in that?

R Healthy food, locally grown as much as people I feel would add to people’s health and wellbeing in that respect. Food security, absolutely. Personal family satisfaction and wellbeing, yes, but it’s what actually creates that. It’s almost all of these things, plus I think environment on top. I think having a reasonable workload, having a balanced life between work and recreational time. I hesitate in saying that because people didn’t really have recreational time in the past, and I remember as a child being brought up on a farm and my life was, there was so much interest there, we worked hard, we had this fantastic wildlife around us, and it took me many years through my teenage years and not until way into my 20s that I could understand, why do people go on holiday, why do people need holidays.

That was a concept that I couldn’t really understand, and the way that people, because my mum did bed and breakfast on the farm and the way that people would arrive there, stressed, exhausted, and this was a holiday, they put so much into that because it meant so much to them. I could not get my head round why people were in such a state. That’s where I feel, that’s one of the things that does make people more resilient in a situation like this, where they have connections to an environment, but they don’t actually really appreciate the significance of it.

I Are there particular features about the environment or the landscape of [area C] that you think are particularly key to maintain or to keep, to ensure that they’re kept? Is there something special about [area C] itself?

R I think on [area C] landscape is one of the key things that is what makes people say wow more than anything. The eagles are another thing within that that is really impressive for a lot of tourists, and for a lot of residents although the crofters might not be quite so happy to see them.

[pause in recording[

R I think these things are important and I think how it’s captured and getting a good cross-section of all the different views on that is important in shaping the way forward often, because it can influence where things go.

I Talking about the landscape…

R The landscape is what makes the biggest first impression, but within that I think it’s the wildlife that really enriches people’s lives more than anything.

I Was there anything else here that you wanted to pick out?

R Public goods services… This biodiversity enhancement, I suppose that maybe covers stemming the declines as well, and trying to reinstate, because a lot of things are being lost. An increasing number of people who have been born and bred on [area C] comment to me all the time now, it happens more often, where have all these ducks gone, why don’t we see this any more, what’s happened to this. It’s constantly asking me to try and explain the losses, which is quite difficult.

I How much attention, you’re talking about how useful the crofters are in terms of managing the environment, how important do you think they find the soil, and maintaining the soil in good health?

R I don’t think for a lot of them that is, there’s crofters and there’s crofters. These days I think it’s probably only those crofters who are relying on crofting for their income, on that larger scale systems, that they fully appreciate the value of the soil. I think a lot of people don’t, and they don’t understand it, they don’t know what’s going on, they don’t know how to change it, they don’t know what’s optimal, and I think there are a lot of issues with that. They haven’t got any concept of what really good healthy soil would be.

One of the things in here, I suppose it does come in in terms of discussions we’ve had about this whole quality of life, but that connection with the environment I think is really key and really important to people’s health and wellbeing. The way society is today, I think we’re seeing a lot of changes in our human population, which the fundamental basic things like this perhaps are not addressing, in the sense of there is an increasing number of people who need support because a lot of these things are deteriorating, diminishing, and all the other technicological things that are impacting them, plus the poor quality of the food that most of them eat, I think we’re ending up with a society that is much weaker and needs a lot more support.

I So a lot of the loss of some of the resilience factors from there means there are more needy people, and that in itself is becoming a support issue?

R That is becoming one of the biggest burdens on society. From my perspective, I think that’s where we’re trending because so many of these things have fallen short over the years, because of the trajectory we’re on at the moment.

I Do you see that more in younger people or is it across the board?

R I think it’s more in the middle years that people are actually in that situation now, but I can see it being an even bigger problem for younger people, because the age at which people are needing support and falling down for various reasons in terms of health wellbeing etc, is coming down all the time. A lot of it is to do with the society that’s created and the environment that we’re in now.

It’s quite scary to think that if you go to the towns and cities I think the proportion is possibly higher than here but there’s an increasing number of people who are in that sort of basket in this sort of environment as well, but for different reasons perhaps. It’s just as resilience is, their resilience is not there to cope with the pressures that they’re having to deal with living in this sort of situation.

I We’ve a list of pressures and stresses, you’ve already mentioned climate change, you’re talking about modern way of living as a pressure, you’ve talked about changes in the quality of food. I’m not sure any of those are actually in here so that’s helpful to have extras. Are there things there that you would see as a key challenge that [area C] needs to be prepared for?

R The weather is key on [area C], and I think a lot of people suffered from depression with the kind of winters that we have here which, from what I can gather is more of an issue now than it was in the past because the climate has got much wetter and much windier through the winter months. The older people will comment on that quite often. Changing disease, pest spread patterns, I think that’s an issue for the human population but it’s also an issue for the livestock. As somebody who has suffered from lyme disease for 26/7 years I think that the significance of these things is underrated.

The impact that diseases and these sorts of tick related illnesses is having on livestock, and on wildlife as well because that’s one side of things that is never really considered. Grouse suffer from all these tick-borne illnesses, lots of birds have parasites and ticks and all sorts of issues, and the ability of their systems to cope with these varies from species to species. I think that it’s something that is not well enough understood, I don’t know if people have really studied that very much at all, but I think there’s a lot of issues there that are hidden that we haven’t uncovered yet.

I So the impact of the wetter winters on diseases on parasites affects a whole host of things, from humans to livestock to wildlife?

R It’s more complex than that because it’s the combination of the wetter winters, the climatic warming, but also a lot of these things are to do with the pressures that we’ve put on the landscape, on the soil in particular over the years, and the high densities of livestock there have been in some areas. It’s where you have huge densities of whatever species, whether it’s humans or deer or sheep, that’s where you’re going to get bigger increases in disease and pests, salmon, it’s all the same. It’s not compatible with a healthy environment to have these high densities at all.

I Are there still high densities?

R The numbers of sheep on [area C] have declined by about, I would like to see the figures, what they are now, but from the 70s I think you’re heading towards 80,000 less now than there were then, possibly more.

I Would you like to see it go down even more?

R I think the situation is, you have to look at the longer term of these things. The hills, the landscape generally has been overgrazed since the invasion of sheep at the Clearances, when the numbers from then on just built and built. There’s only so long you can do that without there being significant impact. I think they do have significant impact and it’s impossible to measure that because you can’t turn the clock back. Equally, we are where we are and we have to try and improve the health of that environment, it’s not something that’s going to happen overnight, and how best to do that needs [person 7] and a better brain than mine to work that out.

I When I talk to crofters they say, if you’ve got fewer sheep then it will all go rank, bracken and old heather, and they worry about fires and so on. You have quite a different perspective?

R Totally. Crofters are very anti-woodland but in fact for some of these areas some low density native woodland that isn’t grazed by sheep might be one of the best ways of restoring some of the soils and the fertility in these areas. They’d shoot me down if they heard me say that. A lot of this landscape was tree-covered in the past, it wasn’t always bereft of trees as it is now, apart from conifer woodlands.

I Presumably you’d have to plant trees now, when you fence off the sheep and the deer nothing will grow back?

R It depends where you are, in some areas you would get something growing back but it depends, and it would take a long time. It’s been hard-pressed for a long time with overgrazing, it’s not going to recover in a lifetime I wouldn’t have thought. These soils have built up over thousands of years. It sounds a bit depressing but I find it really quite sad how we have abused our land and our landscape, and I think are doing so increasingly in the seas now, all this increasing all the fish farming and all the technological advances that come with that, the density of the fish, the way they manage things, all the chemicals that they feed into the fish.

The marine environment, ok it’s a large body of water but they are impacting on things every day by putting all the chemicals in there. That’s a personal perspective rather than the [environmental organisations]. Sometimes when you get into the depth of discussions on things like this you can’t dissociate. Things that are [the environmental organisation], their policies and things go so far but they actually don’t really get to the nub of things very often.

I Is there anything else here that strike you, you talked about the diseases?

R Long term pressures, yes. Land and soil, habitat degradation, huge issue. Pollution of air water and soil, I think pollution of sea water, fresh water and soil are, I don’t think there’s so much air pollution here, but I could see the others.

I So fresh water as well as sea water?

R To a lesser degree but… I suppose when I think of fresh water I think of what they do to our drinking water, it’s horrendous what they do to our drinking water, and so unnecessary. Fresh water less so but fresh water is impacted by what the doses of cattle and sheep and everything else, so it’s still affected. Extreme weather events, yes. Outbreaks of diseases, I suppose there’s a lot of links between, I don’t know if you could go as far as calling it an outbreak but the levels of parasites, whether it’s nematode worms or whatever in the soil, are so affected, all of these things are affected by the weather, you seem to get sudden increases of them for a very short time. I suppose it is an outbreak but sometimes it’s quite local, with short term effects, but I think the disease thing and the weather are intricately linked in terms of how they operate. I’m not very good on the economic side of things. I think having things like good broadband is really important to survival these days. I do have my reservations about all of that as well in that…

[pause in recording]

R All of these things are a necessary part of life nowadays, and I don’t play that down in any sense. I think that the bombardment of people by high frequency electromagnetic fields and extreme low frequency electromagnetic fields is having much more impact on people’s health than governments and society are prepared to accept. I’ve got personal experience of that in that the lyme disease has had such an effect on my nervous system because it actually got into my nervous system. I’m much more aware of the impact that these things are having because my nervous system is not as resilient as most people’s is.

So it does have a very significant effect and I think that over time that’s going to manifest itself in other ways in people who may generally consider themselves very healthy in other aspects, and that concerns me for the future. It also concerns me from the perspective that if that’s having an effect on me as the size I am as an adult, on the impacts that it’s having on either younger humans who are less hardened to a lot of these things, and also to wildlife. That does concern me that something that could change how organisms are in the future because of it.

I Have you perceived any changes at the moment? I’m thinking about all these power lines and wind turbines, are they affecting wildlife?

R I think it’s more to do with all these masts, TV masts, microwave dishes, all the rest of it. But it’s something that is so pervasive I think it’s immeasurable. That’s very much a personal concern for the future, and for the future of all species, all life forms.

I Can I ask you about sea eagles? If you talk to crofters quite a lot of them see sea eagles as an existential threat, how do you view them, how do you view the issue between crofters and sea eagles?

R This is an issue that I have been very heavily involved in since the mid-90s. A lot of it, it hasn’t been something that has naturally grown as the sea eagle population has grown, it’s something that, I don’t deny that there are some local areas where there may well be some issues. It’s quite a complex issue and I’ve got a lot of knowledge of sea eagles in Norway and how they operate there, so I’m very interested in the behaviour of sea eagles in Scotland, and how they are behaving.

When I study sea eagles here, for the most part I see sea eagles doing what sea eagles should do, they will nest in trees wherever there are trees, they will nest in cliffs where they don’t have a tree option or where they’re needing a safer option. They spend the bulk of their time either roosting in trees and tucked away in places, or roosting and feeding, hunting along the coastlines. I don’t see them hunting fields for livestock, I don’t see them hanging over, sitting on fenceposts hanging over these areas looking for the next…

[pause in recording]

R I think that sea eagles are largely behaving as sea eagles do right throughout the world. They have evolved over thousands of years, in parallel with golden eagles, and golden eagles are very much the eagle of the land and sea eagles very much associated with coastal areas, with water bodies in particular, whether that’s a sea or a loch or a river or whatever. When we study their diets, the bulk of things that are showing up are related to marine environments on [area C], not exclusively but the bulk of it. So I think that as time, even in the time that I’ve been on [area C] since 1995, and over that time I have seen declines in the natural prey that is available to predatory wildlife, whether that’s a fox or an eagle or whatever species, both at sea and on land all of these things have declined.

In some parts of the west of Scotland I think that the degradation of upland areas and the loss of wildlife is so significant that it’s potential that these large predators are diverting from their normal hunting patterns and incorporating livestock into that because there is nothing else. I think that’s a sad reflection on our agricultural system if our wildlife and our natural systems are so degraded that that is all that these animals, these birds have to feed on.

Along with that, if you go back to the 50s, 60s, the agricultural departments used to employ people to control things like foxes and stoats and corvids and all sorts. None of that happens now and while there is patchy fox control I think the numbers of foxes that we have in the countryside are far higher than they used to be, and without that natural food chains with higher predators here their numbers will continue to increase unless people actually take on that role properly whilst controlling these species. And that’s quite an emotive subject, a very difficult one for the [environmental organisation], a lot of animal lovers are not in favour of that at all but our system is so out of balance.

I I was surprised the blame is always put on sea eagles and not on golden eagles, is there something special about sea eagles that they’re particularly vulnerable to that accusation?

R Sea eagles by their very nature, they’re bigger than golden eagles, they’re much more visible. Sea eagles have evolved to inhabit the coastal areas and if you look at the west of Scotland, where is human habitation based but in the coastal areas. All our roads, apart from those that are linked to these coastal areas, are largely round about the coast or close to it. [area C], most of the habitation on [area C] is around the periphery of the island, around the coast rather than in the middle.

For thousands of years people and sea eagles lived in very close association, and actually the sea eagles were revered by humans, they were seen as a very positive thing that could bring them luck, it was a nice thing to have around. Then all of that gradually over time changed as pressures on, with increasing population the pressures to provide food for that population increased and I think probably from Tudor times onwards anything that was seen as potentially competing with humans for food was seen as something that wasn’t desirable to have around. That came to a peak in Victorian times with all the shooting and hunting we had then.

With all of that, golden eagles are very elusive creatures and loads of people who live on [area C] have never seen a golden eagle, but yet have they will have seen a sea eagle. So there’s an element of, they’re the ones that are biggest and they’re the ones that you see, they’re the ones that you see around because they’re not seeing golden eagles so they’re more obvious targets. There’s also an element of the fact that they’ve been reintroduced and so they were brought, the population and that embryo of the population was brought here so it’s something they see that’s humans induced that therefore humans can remove it.

Partly as a consequence of all of these things there is this management scheme that can allow them to access funding if they have problems with sea eagles. Therefore, I know with some people the way the sea eagles management scheme works now is that sea eagles are all over [area C] therefore anybody can get in to the management scheme. It’s almost regardless of whether you have a problem, whether there really is an issue, they can access funding there, so it’s in their interests almost to have a problem.

Lots of people join that scheme and there’s lots of benefits can come from it in terms of their crofting systems, improving them and making them more resilient and more environmentally friendly. I don’t mean to knock that but I think what upsets me is the perception that there’s a growing problem with sea eagles and that every crofter on [area C] virtually is losing lambs to sea eagles, which is just not the case. There are increasing problems with foxes here, I suspect there might even be a lot more problems with golden eagles than they appear to see themselves.

I Is there anything else there, moving to thinking about responses and what the mitigation or adaptation strategies from your perspective?

R A lot of people I think don’t think of systems because they don’t have that broader perspective at all, but that’s partly something that has come with my job and partly with my training, and a lot of that is a time perspective too. Although I set out to study birds my first degree was in geology and so my perspective at times is different from a lot of others. I think it’s beneficial as well because you can see the changes over time, you can see how things have evolved better in the sense of where we are and why things are as they are. But it also gives you a perspective in terms of future and how the changes we’re making now and the way we are now the impacts that these are going to have in the future.

I Do you want to think about mitigation adaptation strategies?

R I think number 1 is probably a very good idea because the land is becoming so poached, partly through high densities but partly because of the climate. I think the whole resource efficiency thing needs to go a lot further than it has done. I think it’s not just the waste production but the whole way we manage waste as well. We need to actually do a complete U-turn in terms of the amount of single use disposable materials that we have, and continue to generate, particularly with plastics but it refers to textiles, to everything, there’s just too much out there in terms of continually churning it out and not even using all that’s made. There’s so much, vast amounts of things that are made that then go out of fashion so people won’t use them, there should be a lot more…

[pause in recording]

R Resource efficiency and completely rethinking what’s happening there. Resource efficiency I’m saying yes to, in terms of reduction of plastics and textiles and all those sorts of waste. Operational efficiency, I think that there’s a huge need for that in terms of reduction in bureaucracy because we’re completely tying ourselves in red tape these days, and I think that operational efficiency could come from less bureaucracy.

Technological innovation, I’m a bit lukewarm about that. I think there are places where that could be useful but I think there’s an awful lot we know that we just don’t put into practice properly at the moment. Even proper building of buildings, structures in a way that makes them energy efficient, resilient, long lasting, the quality of materials these days, everything goes to quantity not quality. I think if we went back to a system where we had better quality and less of it, ok it’s not so good for the economics but it would be much better for the environment and for our entire futures and the planet.

New agricultural income resources, I think that there is scope for that but again it comes down to quality not quantity, and being very bespoke to what’s appropriate for an area, and even in a very local sense on [area C].

I Would you see more local decision-making, less central bureaucracy make the decisions more locally, is that the kind of thing you’re advocating?

R Yes, for example local people were absolutely against some of these fish farms up in [area 5] but the government has overridden that decision because they’re looking at Scotland’s GDP, we’re looking at quality of life and the waters and things here. They’re not interested in that because they want Scotland to be independent and have a high GDP so that we can stand on our own two feet, whereas local people want that quality of life and they are actually for so many more jobs and it’s worth so much more than the GDP that they’re attaching to it, and the government are not valuing that the way local people are.

So even where local farming authorities are turning down applications the government is overriding things so that perspective is, they’re coming from completely different perspectives, and I think one is long-term, you look at local decisions like that and they’ll give you a decision that has long-term bearing on that sort of local community, government, short-term.

Non-farm, off-farm activities, I’ll need to think about that. I think local markets and local sourcing of food is potentially something that could be much more rewarding, healthy, better for the environment, and produce better quality without the chemicals and things that they have now, and the plastics. There’s a lot to be said for things like that. [inaudible] yes, especially with small-scale. Machinery, we’ve looked at, through the kind of corncrake work that we do with crofters, we’ve had potential projects that would look at sharing labour and machinery but trying to get these off the ground, trying to get the funding to support something like that, it’s not there.

Modified [inaudible] reliance on subsidies, I think that’s a very difficult thing in a situation where you’re working with extremes, and on a small scale. So, the subsidy side of thing, I think there’s more need for subsidies to be tailored to what is delivered rather than it just be a foregone conclusion that it’s going to be there if you have a few sheep or a few cattle or whatever. So again I think a lot of that comes down to quality of what is actually delivered, and that’s something that people have lost sight of these days in that respect.

Geographical distribution of facilities, markets and assets, I think that [area C] could produce a lot more of the food that it needs. If things were functioning better here I’m sure that they could have sufficient markets near for the produce that they made, it’s not sold that way, everything kind of gets exported, most of our sea food ends up in Spain for example. Again that comes down to the economics. While for some of that is understandable, it shouldn’t make it prohibitive, expensive and difficult to have local products locally.

Prioritise local short market channels, yes, I think local markets are completely undervalued, underrated and there needs to be a lot more reliance on them than the supermarket chains. Supermarket food these days becomes more and more processed, even fruit and veg [inaudible] come in a bag of nitrogen, everything is doctored in some way, and the plastics and packaging that comes with it is ridiculous. [inaudible] production capacity [inaudible] I’m all for using renewable energy and making a lot of these things more accessible to people on a community basis so that communities do have more say, but it also builds resilience when they have more say, and that control on what they’re doing.

That’s the greatest thing for building resilience in local communities, is giving them the power to actually make these decisions. If that was better understood by government, I think Scottish Government have gone a long way towards that sort of community side of things, they’re much better from what I can gather from England or elsewhere, but I think there’s still opportunity there for them to increase their understanding and support in key places where a lot of it is in the background stuff but it increases capacity enormously.

I’m a director of the local community company, and we have taken on a huge number of projects, none of which we could have done without support from DTAS (Development Trusts Association Scotland), to actually have administrative support. They provide financial support for us to employ an administrator, which is supporting the work we do within the community. Because the rest of us are all volunteers, we employ some people now, we’ve developed a campsite, we employ people at the campsite, jobs for locals, income back into local projects. We have developed an allotment site, which is like a growers’ hub it’s called, and through that we’ve developed a men’s shed, we’ve got the kids involved with the growing of the hub, working with schools, there’s been a lot of benefits there for some of the children, especially if there are kids with ADH and all sorts of other issues, of which the numbers seem to be growing these days. These sorts of facilities are providing a means of progressing with these kids that they can’t do within the classroom.

We also have developed a horticultural therapy sector up there, and that’s providing support for people in the community who have nowhere else to go but they need that sort of input, that sort of communal practical positive thing to do, usually for mental health reasons but some of it’s physical as well. We’re currently developing a forest school, there’s all sorts of things like that that are projects within community for the community that are providing support to elements of the community where the infrastructure isn’t there otherwise and they are just falling through the net and coming to grief as a result. So their quality of life is enhanced by that and it actually can help them on the road to recovery if that’s possible for whatever their situation is.

There are one or two other communities on [area C], like [area 10] is one where I think they have got strong community cohesion and active people who have been quite innovative in taking projects forward to achieve things for that community, which support that community and give it a stronger sense of community wellbeing and strength and resilience.

I Anything you wanted to say you haven’t had a chance to say?

R It’s a very interesting subject that it’s nice to get a chance to chat about it. I think there’s not enough people who have that breadth of awareness and sensitivity to appreciate some of these things.

End of transcript