ResULTS project: case study C, interview 201

Face to face interview with crofter and son, conducted 26/2/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R1 and R2

I We’re particularly interested in where the pinch points come, where you have to make trade-offs.

R1 Definitely, certainly to what we’re doing here as well. It’s predominantly meat bred animals that I keep. I don’t sell anything commercially, nothing goes through the ring, everything gets killed and chopped and on it goes. Most things are here, the breeding stock and stuff like that are just here until we’ve done the thing, I’m not even keen on selling that on to somebody else, it’s never been off the place and the stress of it all, take it off and then ways to make it look fat and go into whatever chain, whatever pet food chain or whatever, I just put them in the [inaudible] ethical I think.

Native bred animals, low input, our inputs up here are astronomical because everything’s got to be transported off the place, all your feeding stuff. This year hay and straw’s just a joke, I was on the phone this afternoon trying to get hay, £50 a bale, off the farm before it’s delivered. I’ve got nearly 100 head of cattle, you’re not going to sustain that for very long. I’ve just put 70-odd animals back out on to the hill, they’re getting hard feed which again is over £300 a ton, but I certainly can’t afford to keep them kicking about here putting hay and the prices have just gone absolutely crazy.

I How many cattle do you have?

R1 97 I think. There’s only 30-odd breeding cows because of meat production but I keep two into three generations.

I So you slaughter them about a couple of years old?

R1 It depends what they are, there’s Highlanders kicking about there like four year olds just now. Because they’re not on a low ground place getting fed, fed, we’re basically marketing something that’s as natural as possible. The beast is clean as well [inaudible] off the hills, you’re not producing big fat beasts, they’re native bred beasts that are foraging all year round. There’s flavour in them, just a different product altogether. We’ve got Highlanders and crosses of, shorthorn crosses and then the last couple of years I’ve been crossing with a Simmental bull and an Angus bull. The Simmental calves I’m actually doing them like rose beef, they’re between ten months and 18 months old they’re getting slaughtered. And I’ve got a specific market for that, I take them whole carcases and do nothing with it.

I Is that rose veal or is rose beef different?

R1 Because it’s been weaned from its mum it’s not veal, it’s on to the second stage where it’s not mature enough to call it beef. It’s stunning but there’s small volume, in comparison to selling the same animal through the market, which is what everybody else does, they’re probably worth, a couple of [inaudible] calves £350-400, put them away as rose veal, minimum £1500 each, £14 a kilo for them. And then as the summer goes on obviously the size of the beast goes up [inaudible] veal so the prices goes up. That seems to be really good but it’s a specific market.

I Is that just one purchase?

R1 It’s a local restaurant. As far as that’s concerned it’s fragile enough, so they take a lot of my other products, take my pigs and my pork products and my lamb, and take venison as well. We’re quite unique in that way that everything’s off the place but then I’m not trying to compete with your commercial animals that can feed hundreds if not thousands of people. I was in the abattoir in Dingwall two weekends ago and there’s cattle carcases hanging up and they’re not even 18 months old. That’s why the country’s on its knees healthwise, it’s not good food, it’s not healthy food [inaudible] too much of something that’s grown far too fast.

It’s quite unique in that sense but you’d never feed the commercial market, but if I was to go down the road of the commercial market like everybody else is doing roundabouts, supplying store animals, they’re having to meet bang on grades, they want all the lambs as level as possible and [inaudible] so they’re all finished at the same time. With my native bred animals, because you’re not forcing any of it at any one time, everything’s maturing at a different stage. My lambs I think 130 lambs in that bottom field, they’ve all different mixed breeds and it means I can supply more or less the same grade of carcass all of this next year. My cross Suffolk lambs that’s running at the minute they’re either cross [inaudible] ewes or Hebridean ewes, but then they get down and into the pure ones and as the year goes on the native breeds are slower than [inaudible]

I So you’re able to supply them 12 months a year?

R1 Yes, two restaurants with my lambs. So it’s quite unique, it’s just a unique kind of job. But then again environmentally as shit goes on the ground, fertilizer goes on the ground, none of it’s intensive by any means. I think there’s 2600 acres or something of quite hard hill ground, so the animals are quite sparse.

I Was it easy to find a market? It sounds like you need marketing skills to create these things.

R1 No, because they’re looking for the product, a lot of the top end restaurants are looking for unique products and I turn down umpteen restaurants every year because I want to… I could say at the beginning of the year, yes I can supply you all but come the beginning of the summer we run out of stuff, and then they’re just going to go somewhere else. You’re then trying to compete again into the market the next year, whereas if you’re actually loyal to your customer base they’re loyal to you.

I Am I right in thinking you’ve got a direct marketing as well?

R1 Direct market, it is because we’re friends, we’re neighbours, it’s all getting consumed locally, you’re not having to put it out there and boast about what it is. It’s almost like a kept secret. I’ve got a building down the bottom there, it’s not advertised but there’s stuff there for sale, but if I’ve got surplus stuff it’s in the freezers or fridges [inaudible] certain people know they can come and get it and put pennies in the penny jar sort of thing, it’s not actually manning a shop. However the next process we’re at at the minute is we’ve just renovated a wall garden on the farm, and my ambition is that all the produce goes through the walled garden and nobody else gets to add that added value, if I need to add that added value to it myself, which would mean [inaudible].

I What would you do with the walled garden?

R1 Our plan is to do events and try and cater for all these buses [inaudible] big space, big marquee and big outdoor cooking area, and they can feed quite a lot of people in a short period. You’re not a restaurant from the morning until 12 o’clock at night doing fine-dining, you’re actually turning out quality meat on rolls and try and shift it that way.

I [inaudible]

R1 The little back-packing ones, we get them off the road, sitting in laybys taking pictures of Highland cows, lethal, absolutely lethal. The same on [inaudible] it’s chaos in the summer trying to get them [inaudible] put them all into this corner out the way, feed them. I put public toilets in last year, they’ve got toilets, they’ve got space to wander about, they can see the animals, go for a walk down the beach [inaudible] doing them a favour [inaudible] coach companies. That’s where we’re heading for this year with all… Back to the farm again, killing the animals and stuff, the logistics are still a nightmare because everything’s got to go to Dingwall to get slaughtered and then back down to Kyle at the end of the week.

I I gather you’ve been involved in the abattoir?

R1 My wife, yes, basically been pushing that since just about day one. I think the more people, the next generation that’s coming into crofting it’s all about sustainability and food security and all the rest of it, and there’s a queue of people waiting to get local facilities. The right infrastructure, [area C] just so lacks the whole west coast of Scotland lacks it. Again it comes to legislation to the powers that be want to be in control of what it is that you’re doing, just make it more and more difficult, more and more expensive. The travelling back and forward to Dingwall is a seven hour trip, that’s your day [inaudible] the day before sorting animals out, and you’ve got another half a day trailing down to Kyle to get carcasses home before you even start processing anything.

I Do you do your own butchering?

R1 Yes, a bit of processing as well. I could run the farm as a commercial farm and you take what you get at the end of the year, and you get your subsidies. How long have we had the farm? Seven years we’ve had it, and we didn’t have two beans to rub together when we took the place on. It was doing something that was, you want to keep native breed animals because they’re the cheapest ones to start with, but then when you come to sell them on you get nothing for them. The whole cycle was completely wrong. Then we started marketing our own produce to the farmers markets and that kind of thing, but never had the volume to go direct to the restaurants. We supply two or three top end places, but the long-term goal is to get [inaudible] for it, and my little £300 calves that used to get laughed at are now £3,500 calves, cook them and feed them to people, then that way we’ll be completely sustainable.

It all went well, you’re then having to start again with the LFASS thing that we got in anticipation of leasing the farm to a smallholder, I was building up the animal numbers but I didn’t know they were all registered to that holding but on different linked holdings. Then when I took the farm on they amalgamated the smallholding farm number into the farm, which meant all of a sudden the stocking density that I had massive stocking density on seven hectares, they applied that to the farm and you haven’t got that any more, there’s an 80% penalty on your LFASS at the moment. But our subsidy payment has just been gashed, we had to buy the entitlement, we had to buy the lowest end entitlement, €4 each or something, just to get a foot in the door, before we even started, and then chasing the stocking density nonsense ever since. Every penny of subsidy we’ve had here has gone into buying a tractor, buying a quad bike, towards buying a [inaudible] and a baler, ploughs and all different bits and pieces that you need, you have [inaudible] putting in toilets, marquees, every penny of the subsidy money is going back into the place.

I And a few more by the sound of it, unpaid labour?

R1 A lot of unpaid labour, silly hours, long days, but hopefully the fruits of the effort that’s gone into it is going to be, that walled garden when it gets up and going. And that way we can keep native bred animals on the place, low cost, low input to get the maximum out of them. This taking animals to the market and taking what you’re given when you get there is a nonsense, and then you phone for a bale of hay and they want £50 for it. When I take my lambs to market next year, put them in the ring and sell them at £130. It doesn’t work that but they’re doing the same to us, the big farmers on the east coast, trying to squeeze us out.

The other reason why I went down the road of native bred animals was the eagle problem on the place. The sheep were getting decimated, we were losing 100 plus adult sheep in the winter, and then in the springtime when the lambs started that was their food source for the rest of the summer, we were getting next to no lambs at all. We were getting new lambs to replace your cast ewes were the ones you lost over the winter and that population was just [inaudible].

I had five years shepherding the place before I got the lease on the farm, and it was soul-destroying, putting all that work into the sheep and getting absolutely nothing out of them. Which is why we pushed to lease the farm so we could put cattle on the farm and change the dynamics of it. The sheep were getting less and less and the ground was getting poorer and poorer, the green bits were getting smaller and the moor bits were getting more rank and all the rest of it. Environmentally it was heading for disaster.

I Do you think the local native breeds of sheep also aren’t so attractive to eagles?

R1 That was my theory, because the [inaudible] and the Hebrideans, there’s always one of them on the lookout and they’re going to stand a better chance [inaudible]. There’s always one on the lookout for everything else, and they don’t pack up like sheep, they take off in a line so they stand a bit more of a chance, then you’ll get one that’ll take off in another direction like a distraction. Their instincts were far greater than the sheep that were on the place, the mothering ability of the sheep that were on the place because they never had the chance to raise a lamb properly, we had a lamb a few weeks old they’d be lying sleeping in the sun one day and just wander off and leave them, because they were that used to them being taken all the time. Once the white sheep finished on the hills they started on the native bred ones as well.

I You sound as though you think they were that much better?

R1 No, because when their other food source runs out that’s what they’re going to get, they [inaudible] in comparison to anything else. There was one year when we had the blackies and the Cheviots on the hill, before we were renting the place, we away wintered the sheep and there was 411 sheep I put away to winter and brought them back and lambed them off the place, lambed them in a neighbour’s place up the road. I was bringing them home at two weeks old, they’d been castrated and Spot On, and they were as good as bombproof for going to the hill, I split all the twins, I had 60-odd lambs in the shed that I was [inaudible]. So there was no excuse, it wasn’t like the ewe was on the hill with twins [inaudible] twins, it was the basic [inaudible] formed [inaudible]. The sheep were going off to the hill, the eagles had taken the lambs off the hillsides and letting them away sort of thing. Six weeks after the end of lambing all the sheep were on the hill, six weeks later I bring the sheep in and 276 lambs out of 411 not there any more, in six weeks, and we had 16 [inaudible] on the place that summer, it was just a feeding frenzy for them.

I Was that golden eagles or sea eagles?

R1 Sea eagles. [inaudible] an absolute menace.

I That problem arises.

R1 Probably what I’ll do, I’ve not actually kept ewe lambs for three years now. The plan is to breed the sheep out so I haven’t got them any more and just buy lambs in, because the input in feeding sheep all winter is through the roof.

I How would you identify a resilient system?

R1 Certainly one that’s not dependent on the subsidies [inaudible] fall out of that job. Especially around here I think a lot of people’s going to shut shop, there’s not enough money as it is in the job so people will end up walking away from it. I think resilience is local food production. Cut out all these silly middle-men that have been taking a cut for years and years, keep less animals and take them from start to finish, have local infrastructure process and feed visitors coming to the island with what they want, they jump on a plane and go to Italy or Spain, you don’t order a burger and chips or fish and chips, you want the food that’s from the place.

I We came up with three different ways of understanding resilience, one is about absorbing some kind of challenge and I guess that means things like having less income or whatever it is you just absorb that change. The second one is you make some minor adjustments to it in terms of maybe change your breed or something like that. And the third one is to transform the whole system, which I guess is what you’re talking about in you’ve got a whole transformed system, you’ve rethought it from scratch. Do those resonate with you?

R1 As far as buffers and absorbing things, we’re absorbing it all the time. I don’t think it matters what you do when you live in such a place you’ve got so many things against you, whether it be the logistics, the cost of logistics of moving things, the climate, the place is inundated with visitors now, there’s chunks of ground you can’t use in the summertime, big high cliffs, you can’t have cows wandering about because people’s dogs are wandering about six miles up the coast so you’re not in control of it, you just have to absorb it. When you turn up and three of your cows have gone off the cliff you just absorb it, there’s nothing you can do about it.

I Because of dogs?

R1 Because of dogs, because of tourism, people not being considerate or… You just soak it up. I lost cows last winter with a lightning strike, 15 pregnant cows, and you absorb it, that’s off your top line. I look at the stock that’s on the ground as my bank balance, there’s nothing in the bank, there never has been anything in the bank because it’s all standing out there on the hoof, when I need to cash it I cash it. I’m not going to a market with all my eggs in one basket and get what I’m given, they can stay there as long as they want, they’re not costing me a fortune to feed. All you’re doing is topping up that bank balance all the time and when you need to cash it you cash it.

I’ve got animals on the trailer taken them to the market and come home with a third of what I thought they were worth, just on the day there’s some reason or excuse for it. At least this way, by having the end result you’re kind of in control of as and when you cash in on them. We’ve got an income every month coming in rather than a big chunk at the end of the year that you’ve got to sit down and work out there’s this for this and that for that, and all the rest of it. If we need more money we do more processing.

I When I’ve spoken before to people who are selling direct sales in that kind of way, one of the biggest challenges for them was keeping this continue to your supply. It sounds like you’ve cracked that?

R1 I think because I’m not, everybody’s quite stereotypical when it comes to farming and they’re going for everything looking good at the same time. They’ll try and do multiples of animals or whatever but then they’re all fat at the same time, they’re all ready at the same time. I’m not chasing the fat market, I’m chasing the beast market. You take them when they’re ready, you don’t make them ready, you’re not in control of that, they’re doing their own thing and you take them when they peak. And not having a huge market, I’ve picked two or three top-end places and know the quantity of stuff that they are using. It’s not like an *à la carte* menu where they’re chucking [inaudible] somewhere in more than one product.

It’s like [inaudible] bother with pigs for, they cost a fortune and you get nothing back. Actually I know how much I feed them and how much it costs to process them, and I know what they’re worth [inaudible] little bit. There’s a lot of work in them, every single day you have to attend to them, whether it’s feeding or cleaning them, but it’s almost like a loss-leader, sausage and bacon, people can’t get enough of it, it’s the best sausage and the best hand-cut, dry-cured bacon. There’s that demand for that product and then it’s almost, especially when we first started doing markets and stuff, everybody will buy a packet of bacon, selling a big expensive bit of meat is a little bit harder than selling a packet of bacon or a packet of sausage, everybody will buy a packet of bacon or sausages every day of the week.

Selling venison, trying to convince people to eat venison again, we don’t like venison, we don’t eat venison, it’s rank, it’s strong. You’ve not had proper venison yet, if it’s shot properly, if it’s chilled properly and it’s kept clean and it’s cut up properly it’s as good as beef, we had silverside the other night and you wouldn’t have known if it was venison or if it was my beef, it was that close in flavour, because it’s all on the same diet. Too many people turn their nose up at it.

I don’t do stalking, I don’t take people out to hunt, I select what we shoot, quality, it’s not a by-product from the shooting industry, it’s not a by-product from culling deer in a woodland or something. We’ve just had a massive kill in the woodland down here, again completely out of your control, I’ve had the shooting rights on the place for 15 years possibly, managing the place sustainably, I’ve had a nice herd of stags, healthy herd of hinds. You’ve got to take into consideration where they go at different times of the year, they cover a huge amount of ground, not just on this estate. You’re watching them all the time, you’re seeing them when you’re out with your cows or sheep or whatever, and sustainably managing them.

Then you’ve got the forestry organisation that comes in, plants half the farm in native trees, oak trees that are never going to grow, doesn’t get managed for ten years, fences off, all the stuff falling down, fenceposts, ten years at the end of [inaudible] fences getting blown over, posts are snapping, deer start coming into the woodland. Up until then the woodland for me was allowing me to supply venison all year round, because[inaudible] woodland and the stags are there in the summertime, whether they’re in season or not you’re allowed to shoot them, same with the hinds, so long as you’re sensible about what you’re shooting you could keep control of this sort of thing.

But then when the fences start falling down, I’m on the phone to an anonymous forestry organisation, I can’t shoot the deer that’s in your woodland, there’s far too many of them coming in because it’s obviously fenced off from the hill, nice green low ground pasture that’s been planted with oak trees and things, you need to maintain your fences, you need to come and sort your fences. They say yes, it doesn’t happen. And then we get a forestry inspector from the Forestry Commission, for the private peer company that [inaudible] and the Forestry Commission come in to sign things off for grants and things like that, too many deer in the woodland, we say we know there’s too many deer in the woodland they haven’t properly managed the fences and look after the fences, we’ve been asking for the last two years.

So what do they do, they send in two professional shooters, they come in, they first came in last Easter time and shot 67 stags and left most of them because they’re difficult to extract, and then they’ve been back in every other week since. They must have caught not far off 200 beasts. I had a regular herd of about 300 deer on the place, which if you’re shooting 30 or 40 every year, you’ve got your meat supply. It’s healthy, sustainable, it works. [inaudible] fences coming in, deer pile into the woodland and these guys just keep coming back and shooting more and more, infrared lenses, night shooting, the whole shebang.

It’s been carnage out there for the last 12 months, and there’s nothing you can do about it. It’s like all these years of sustainably managing something, somebody doesn’t look after the bit they’re responsible for and the solution is to kill everything that comes in, it’s wintertime, there’s green grass on the low ground, where’s the deer going to go, the fence is open we’ll get the green grass. It’s soul-destroying but we can’t do anything about it. You haven’t got permission to shoot in woodland any more [inaudible] deer don’t need shot, the fence needs fixed [inaudible] woodland [inaudible]. They shoot that many stags off [inaudible] it’s absolutely crazy, it’s not sustainable, it’s disgusting.

It’s not SNH, this is [company 2] Forestry not looking after their bit of woodland and getting paid handsomely by [inaudible] government quangos paying this agency to do this but there’s none of them on the ground. We had a guy from [inaudible] and having a conversation with him, being upset about what’s going on, I’ve got a report saying X, Y and Z, who are we supposed to believe. I said maybe you should believe the people that actually are on the ground, that live here, that have seen what’s going on instead of just relying on a piece of paper. He’s taking somebody else’s word for it, the guys that come and do the shooting, they’re weighing all the beasts [inaudible] and they’re putting crap venison into marketplace that they shouldn’t be doing, trailing it down, I don’t suppose the dealers in Fort William [inaudible] it’s not chilled from here, they’re shooting multiple beasts, they’re getting dragged off the hill, it’s not a bit of meat that’s being looked after, it’s being run into a corner and slaughtered. It’s ludicrous and there’s nothing you can do about it.

I So there’s a lot of absorbing that you’re having to do?

R1 Inspections through the department, up on the hill things around the place, there was 22.5km of fence I put in when they came down and went into the SRDP scheme, and that was going to give us the grant to put the hill fence up. It was an environmental scheme, grazing this time of the year not that time of year, certain numbers on the ground and all the rest of it. We had planted small forestry [inaudible] 2 hectares, it was all about scoring points by doing all these different environmental things to get into it but what we wanted to do was put a fence around the place because you can’t just put animals to an open hill unless you’ve got all day to heft them but those days are long gone, you need a fence.

So we got the grant to do the fence, did the first 11km of fence, up the glen and round the table and into the back, it was a killer, gets it done, fella comes out to inspect it, GPS unit, just [inaudible] it. The ground was doing that, there’s one section between the stream at the bottom of the hill and the stream at the top of the hill, there’s 126m of fence, but on the GPS I think it’s about 16m. We got in touch with them and said we want to put in X amount of metres, and it was just filled in on a bit of paper, there was nothing put into a computer, it wasn’t like we told lies or anything, I put 11,500m of fencing materials in the ground. He comes with his GPS, measures it and he came to 8,000m, so we lost about 2,000m because of the way they were measuring it.

Because this piece of paper on his desk, the number we had on it, and it didn’t agree with the number he came up with, bearing in mind nothing’s certain, this is what we’ve asked for because this is what I’ve put in the ground, according to my GPS this is not what’s there. So the penalty we got was what wasn’t there plus the same again, I think it was £4 a metre so it was 2000m x 4 but because we asked for it the penalty was the same again. So it was like, I’ll just soak it up shall I, I’ve just done a year’s work for nothing. That was my little bit out of it that was a) going to pay for the materials to do the next 11,500m or whatever, and a little bit in the bank because I wasn’t working all summer, I was just doing hill fencing, I was hiring [inaudible] all the materials to buy and everything, they come and do an inspection like that and it was £16-17,000 off.

It’s a joke but at the same time we get paid for however many hectares we’ve got. If you look at it on a map that’s how they work it out, it works both way, if you ironed out this place there’s four mountains on the place, if you ironed it out my stocking density, I wouldn’t get a penny subsidy. So it does work both ways in the big picture, however when you’re actually doing something that’s physically demanding and as financially restraining as that was, to get hit with a penalty like that was an absolute nonsense.

I Couldn’t you challenge him?

R1 No, because they came up with the argument of, when we work out your payment on a piece of paper, it’s flat, sorry. That’s fine if I was living in Fife or somewhere where everywhere’s flat.

I Have you got the [landmark 5]?

R1 I’ve got one of the [landmark 5], yes, and then right out to the [landmark 5] because there’s the [inaudible] and then [inaudible] and [inaudible] as well, it’s all high ground and pretty rank.

I I was going to ask what sort of pressures you have but there seems to be so many.

R1 It’s continuously against you. I kept ten cows that were lean at the back end, I didn’t want to put them back out on the hill, I kept them up the back, fed them all winter. I brought the other cows up from [inaudible] on Saturday and then Sunday night we [inaudible] it must have been Sunday morning [inaudible] I had the pick-up so I didn’t check every corner of the field, so I came back to the shed, I had the sheep to feed next up the back, I fed the sheep and came back into the field where the cows were. I went right round the field, in the far corner of the field there’s a tiny little stream runs through the corner of the field, the cows get a drink, it’s not far from where they get fed, the cow’s lying dead in the bottom of the stream. I don’t know if the other ones butt her and boxed her over on to her side and they’ve all gone for a drink at the same time, but that’s potentially £2,500 off my bank balance.

I If you wanted one thing to happen that will make your system even more resilient than you are at the moment, what would that be?

R1 It wouldn’t be the same product [inaudible] flat green field, because my back’s knackered with riding quad bikes up and down mountains.

I What happens when you’re not well?

R1 I just go on. My back [inaudible] two years ago. I set it all up so the cows were out on the hill, the sheep were out the hill and I could take a couple of months to get over, it took about a year and a half to get over it. You have to get on, did you ever see little phrase up there that was in the Scottish Farmer, you’ve got to get up and feed your animals.

I Is there much working together with neighbours?

R1 Elderly neighbours, young kids that don’t have that ethic any more, and the ones that have any kind of skills at all are all retired. Our neighbours in the township up there, four of them keep cattle I think, and there’s none of them fit enough to go in the ank beside the cows. They’ll feed them every day they’ll put a bit of food in the trough or whatever but they’re not safe to get in a pen with 600 kilo animals. [inaudible] job of putting them through the [inaudible] once they’re through the [inaudible] they can walk them home and do all of that, but when it comes to the physical graft of handling the cows they’re not fit for doing it, you go and help them.

To ask them to come and help me, I put 97 cows through the [inaudible] yesterday by myself bcause somebody else there is a stranger as far as the cows are concerned, it’s going to put them on edge and I don’t want them getting hurt. I don’t want that responsibility, it’s bad enough when they’re seeing to their own cows and they’re standing in the wrong place or leaning up against a gate that’s not shut and there’s a cow heading towards you, you’re constantly shouting at them and telling them to get out the way. I wouldn’t want the responsibility of them coming and helping. You put 97 cows through the [inaudible] dose them all yourself, trimmed two bulls’ feet yesterday as well, and you just get on and do it.

I think because you’re on your own there’s no talking, you’re not getting distracted, the cows are coming out of one pen into another smaller pen, getting what they need done, everything’s getting recorded, there’s no shouting numbers to people, it’s actually more efficient. The cows are happy, there’s no stress [inaudible]. The same with loading animals, you bring cows in and you can pull them out, I can go into the field and you’re not having to pen them up or crush them or take them all to the [inaudible] or something like that, you can walk them round the edge of the field, the two gates in the corner and a trailer and you can just buffer them in and themselves quietly, shut the gate and load it and away you go. There’s no shouting, just keep the stress to a minimum. The cows on the hill as well, you go out and shout [inaudible] they learn to come to you.

I Ideas about what kind of functions need to be maintained in order to stay resilient.

R1 It’s infrastructure, slaughter facilities, available butchers. I do a lot of cutting for guys on [area 8] that do their own venison on [area 8], I get their carcasses up here to cut and they get it back so they can sell it in the shop. Not everybody’s got a processing unit, there’s guys shooting deer on different estates on [area C] for instance and everything’s going away to a game dealer. The demand’s there locally, they shouldn’t be bringing venison on to [area C] to go into restaurants, people should be consuming what’s produced in a place. For the sake of buying a processing unit, building a processing unit or whatever, or having the support for individuals to be able to set up their own, so they can see their products all the way through [inaudible] cut out all these…

Grants towards food development or whatever, the encouragement and incentive for them to take it to the final product, or infrastructure-wise support for somebody to set up a butchering unit when the abattoir gets built, purely to facilitate people’s animals that they want to process from start to finish. And hand do it, make it a proper product. I was in [abattoir 1]’s the other week and we’ve always had this banter for years about this abattoir, saying you’ll not afford to do it, everything’s so expensive, you can’t afford it. I’ve never had a proper walk round the place until two weekends ago [inaudible] I’ve been coming here for years and to be honest I’ve not been interested in them. He said come and have a look, I went through and it’s all mechanical, it’s all buttons and you’re lucky if you have seven people on your killing line, it’s all mechanical, they’re doing very minimal skilful work, the skins are pulled off mechanically.

You can see where the money goes with all the equipment they’ve got in these premises and what you actually need is like what they’ve got on [area 20], it’s a one-man band, a crate to drop your beast in, it goes out on the floor, you winch it up, you bang it on the back of a trolley and there’s two of you with a knife, lift it up, do what it does and away it goes. It doesn’t have to be a system that’s mechanised and processing hundreds of animals, because the care goes out of it, it’s a commercial line, there’s very little care or actual skill as well involved in doing the whole process. It would increase the amount of jobs the abattoir for instance would employ, they could be training the next generation, the skill that’s going to be lost pretty soon if they’re not careful. It’s the easiest part of the whole process.

I Would you not need a veterinary inspector or somebody like that?

R1 Yes, you would still need all of that. But again, legislation, it’s a nonsense, you can get a licence to go and shoot deer, and certify it fit for human consumption. You’ve never met the beast before in your life, you’ve just decided you’re going to shoot it because it looks good on the outside, but they can teach you the basic skills to say whether that’s fit for consumption or not. Your own animals you’ve known since they were conceived, and generations before that, and you’re not allowed to take the jacket and the head off and put them into the food chain. It doesn’t make sense, it’s just red tape.

I’m sure the amount of people that would, if there was a facility on the doorstep, if that infrastructure was back on Skye there would be a lot more people would start working the ground again. They would keep a handful of sheep, they would keep a pig if they didn’t have the thought of having to drag it and all the licences you need to transport your animals all the way to Dingwall. If you could take that part of the process out of it and be able to do everything locally, the economy around here would significantly benefit from it.

I When you say they would work the land again, what were you thinking?

R1 There’s so many vacant crofts, and people with multiple crofts, to try and sustain the commercial market, whereas people would go back to having individual crofts, keeping small amounts of animals, enough for their own freezer and enough to cover the cost of rearing them, being able to share that product out into the rest of the community, instead of importing meat. It all comes down to food security, we’re an island, why aren’t we food secure.

I Are you looking forward to a crofting life?

R2 At some point yes. I’m training to be a mechanic just now.

I Are there also young people wanting to get hands on a croft and do the hard graft that clearly is involved?

R1 Less and less because the incentive’s not there. They watch their dads do it and their grandparents and they’re knackered and not getting much of a reward out of it, it’s not for the subsidy payment. There’s very few people go to the sale with their animals at the moment with a big smile on their face. They put a fortune into them to try and match what they can do on the east coast with having green fields and trying to keep up with that other industry sort of thing. You can’t do it on the west coast, but what you are producing on the west coast is a unique product, it’s slow grown and the taste’s there, there’s not the chemicals in it, it’s lived in a lot cleaner environment than anything living anywhere else. I think it’s a product that would be sought after all over the place, people actually getting their teeth into it properly you know. And there’s an opportunity to export as well, it’s a whole new... I think it’s got huge potential but it comes down to infrastructure, dishing all the subsidy payments out to farmers to feed animals for somebody else to make money out of.

I How would you feel if the subsidies went to infrastructure instead of individuals?

R1 I think a percentage of them could because there’s so many people claiming massive subsidies and not actively farming. A lot of people on that balance of when the subsidy stops that’s them finished, their business is so reliant on that subsidy because they’re getting so little for the product that they’re actually producing, they’re only taking it to a certain stage in its process but they’ve had the expense of rearing it, and rearing the parents, and then getting your lambs to six months old and your calves to six or seven months old, and then passing them on.

It’s almost like educating people as well, do you know the value in that because matey’s going to take it and he’s going to shut in his barn and he’s going to pour this into it and he’s going to get that for it, but do you know how much this man’s getting for that and do you know how much he’s getting for the sake of cooking it? If that all stayed on the island there would be a lot of wealthy crofters and farmers and you wouldn’t need subsidies.

My little calves that are going away, the chef can turn them into £10,000, 700 portions. It’s a very specialist product but if you go to the next level up and you collectively take finished beasts from around [area C], and then you can supply, they’re maybe not the proper class kind of restaurants but the places that are doing sirloin steaks and fillet steak, you can only get that much fillet steak out of a cow and everybody wants fillet steak when they sit down in a restaurant. How many cows do you need to make that many fillet steak dinners, who’s going to eat all the mince, who’s eating all the stew…

For us at the minute, the mince, I supply two burger vans, and then I’ve got another couple of restaurants that will take stewing steak for making pies. I can see potential in all of it, and I want to put my animals through the garden and have one cooking [inaudible] one day and it’s getting served in rolls the next day. People still come to get the experience and the image of the process but they’re not eating what it is you’re trying to cook at the time, it’s already [inaudible] the day before and then reheating it and putting it into rolls. I’ll never get £10,000 but even if I take £1500-3000, thank you very much.

I Do you need new skills? It sounds like you’ve got a fantastic range of skills and you’ve got an engineer on the premises, how easy is it to pick up all these different skills?

R1 Getting somebody with the same mindset that would like to do that kind of thing. Even the restaurants, for them getting checks and things, they’re from all over the world, all over the country, there’s not that many of them employing local kids.

R2 They employ local waiting staff but the kitchen staff, hardly ever.

R1 The summer season up here is hard graft every day until yon time of night.

R2 Yes, dead winters and flat-out summers.

R1 Which has not been attractive to the younger generation, they want something a bit more secure. I think the food industry on [area C] is something that the farmers and crofters really need to re-evaluate, but I don’t think they can do that until there is an abattoir and a place where they can get their animals processed. I think once that happens they’ll actually realise the benefits. You don’t have to keep all those sheep to make the numbers up so you’re getting your subsidy payment, you can actually keep a third of the sheep, do them ten times better on a fraction of the input and actually get a decent price for them, or get a fair price, not put them into storing for somebody else to pick them up and [inaudible].

I How do you cope with things like worm burdens and liver fluke?

R1 Liver fluke’s the killer. I dose my sheep when they come in in the middle of November [inaudible] I had them in for scanning the other week, and I fluke-dosed them with an injection and next day [inaudible] be full of them, and that’s just in [inaudible]. You have to keep them topped up. There again it’s the environment, they’ve got to live somewhere, flat dry fields [inaudible] some of the burden we’ve got here. Ticks are a massive burden, and again because there’s not the quantity of sheep on the hills any more coming in and getting dipped, the hills aren’t getting mopped any more. Even the general public going walking or whatever is a complete liability, because the ticks are all there still, they’re just waiting on a host to hop on to when they come back, so a lot of sheep don’t get dipped any more so there’s a person with a backpack attacked with lyme’s disease.

I Do you see any role for trees?

R1 I think there is a place for trees, but I actually think there is a place for livestock in amongst trees once they get established. If they’re going to plant trees anywhere then they need to be planted in such a way that, native trees, commercial trees [inaudible] they need trees that’s going to in theory grow like the clappers, because the forestry down there has been there since the late-50s and it’s [inaudible] had the hardest upbringing any tree could ever have has lived in [inaudible] all its life, the ground’s shit, the weather’s shit, wind from all directions. Why plant trees [inaudible] trash the ground. I think when they planted the ones down there initially the place was bad with bracken and it was a really bad area for ticks, for the sheep and stuff that was on the ticks [inaudible] planted it.

I don’t mind the native stuff but plant native trees, plant birch, don’t be planting oak thinking it’s going to grow, some clown sitting in an office. It blows 120 miles an hour out there, where’s an oak tree going to be, grows to the height of the heather and then there’s no top on it, oh the deer must have eaten it, no it’s planted on top of a hill 400ft above sea level, what do you think. If you go round a corner and there’s a dip and there’s birch trees that are 80ft high, plant birch trees in the right place. Some of the planting schemes are an absolute joke but it’s not people on the ground that are making these decisions, it’s not people on the ground making these environmental plans and things. It’s academics sitting in an office with a computer and a Google image, they never set foot in the place, they set themselves up for failure a lot of the time.

I How well would local decision-making do, would there be conflicts between different people wanting different types of land use, how does that work?

R1 I think the information that can be gathered from people locally is far more valuable than the academics that work for SNH and all these different places. They’re not people off the ground, they’ve read the books and the texts and seen the programmes but they need to listen to the people on the ground. The little woodland along the end there is a perfect example of what we did as part of an environmental scheme, somebody else came up with a plan, we’ll stick it here, they plant the back side of the burn and this side’s going to regenerate. Our prevailing wind is south-westerly so it wouldn’t matter how big the trees got on the other side, they’re not going to populate this side.

You have to sign up to the scheme, so you do it all, five years down the line they come and say there’s not much regeneration here, you say what did you think was going to regenerate, you have to plant another 1200 trees, get a digger back in and start planting 1200 trees. Who pays for that? That comes out of your pocket. So all that money that you’re getting up until then replaces [inaudible] 2 acre block of woodland cost us an absolute fortune. But if you don’t do what they say when they come out in five years’ time and tell you what to do it, they want all their money back, and some.

I It feels like there’s an awful lot about these penalties that…

R1 The penalties are absolutely shocking. Fenced off the river at the bottom of the field, the field was going to feed the corncrakes, five year or three year scheme, fenced down one side of it, put a hedgerow in and then fenced the river off at the bottom. Somewhere in the small print I was meant to put a pedestrian gate in that bottom fence so you could access the riverbank. Who needs access to the riverbank, it doesn’t need a gate, it’s just another way someone’s going to get left open and someone’s going to get [inaudible] At the time it was a complete [inaudible] it wasn’t done deliberately, it was just a complete [inaudible].

So they came out at the end of the scheme, I think it was three years, they came out and of course they noticed there wasn’t a pedestrian gate. I was given £46 towards putting the gate in in the first instance, anyway it wasn’t there so they calculated on a daily basis, so they had a penalty but then they wanted interest on a daily basis. So that £46 that they paid, that I hadn’t [inaudible]. Somebody had printed off a huge pack, £46 you paid somebody how much to stand next to a printer and print my penalty off to prove to me that I was in the wrong. Things like that drives you nuts.

I The Westminster government when they’re talking about changing subsidies are talking about making it very much away from production and paying for environmental things, and paying by results rather than prescribing what you should do. I know the Scottish government is looking at different things, so it’s not necessarily going to be true in Scotland, but what would be your response to that sort of a scheme?

R1 As long as they’re sensible about things that they actually propose. We looked at a scheme recently that was an environmental scheme and you had to have specific stocking density on a certain area. The amount of animals I would have needed on the place, I think each block would have needed 18 head of cattle on it for so many months over the summer or whatever. I’ve actually got my units split into three units, as it is at the minute, but one of the units is [inaudible] the next one and the other one’s half the size again.

To be able to juggle the animals to meet this scheme, I can’t carry any more than 100 head of cattle, the ground will just not sustain it. There was one of these blocks needed 80 cows in for however many months, but if you were going to sign up to your whole place each block would have had to have had that kind of percentage in it, and the volume of cattle you would have needed to oblige their motivation, just can’t do it, it’s on LFASS ground, region 2 ground or region 3 ground or whatever. If you go to Dumfries and Galloway, they’ve got big green rolling hills and they get paid the same rate as everybody else, you can do it and I can understand why you’d need to do it to keep up with the production.

But the ground we’ve got here, the grasses take a long time to grow, the heather takes a long time to grow, it’s not green grass with fertilizer on it that does that in a season, if you put cows out there and blaze it with cattle, you’ve got to leave it for nearly two years before you put cattle back on it again. You can’t be constantly running cattle on the place, the ground will not take it, walk on the same tracks, steep ground and they’re picking the same routes, the ground will not take it but the plant species that are on the ground will not tolerate it either.

You have to have a balance, if you clear a block out you’ve got to leave it another couple of years to reinstate itself and recover. Whereas someone sitting in an office that comes up with an environmental plan for a place, what we’ve got here is very different to the hill at [inaudible] or very different to the one they’ve got at [area 16] or… Each parcel of land has to be individually looked at and qualified I suppose, on what schemes they put out, they can’t just do the same scheme for everybody because we’re all in a different environment and different gradients of ground. There has to be a little more thought put into it, to come up with bright ideas and crazy plans.

As far as access is concerned, the ground needs grazed, environmentally it needs managed, you cannot just see what the [inaudible] Trust estimates as well, they shut parcels of land off, shoot everything off, there’s no deer, nothing, looks magical the first year, second year beautiful with flowers everywhere, third year it’s nothing but rank grass, there’s no insects, no dung on the ground so there’s no insects, no little birds, the whole ecosystem starts to collapse and then lo and behold it catches fire so all the little trees are gone as well, start again, doesn’t work.

It doesn’t work and they’ve done it time and time again. You see them taking over parcels of land, yes take the animals off, the first year it’s lovely because it’s this and that and haven’t we done brilliant, the second year there’s probably a few less than what there was that first year and then the place just starts encroaching on itself and eventually it will catch fire. People can’t walk on it, it’s white scrubby grass full of ticks and there’s nothing there, no birds flying about, nothing to look at, just look at the yellow dead mass of moorland. We found that here putting the cows on, the difference in the bird population on the hill because there’s dung and insects, the sheep numbers declined, the ground got encroached and the long grass got grown, and you ended up with this dormant kind of mass. Since the cows have been on the ground the diversity of the birds and the insects has gone through the roof.

I Do you think there’s anything particular about [area C], or the environment of [area C] that ought to be preserved as a place?

R1 Yes, in the fact that, you went to the bothy for instance.

I Yes, you’ve got the most spectacular coastline in Britain.

R1 It’s absolutely stunning, and it has to be… If the whole economy of a place like [area C], it’s quite a fragile economy, we’re very fortunate the last few years that the tourist industry has taken in, but you’ve got to manage that and you’ve got to have something for these people to come and look at. Once I’m finished with the sheep here, the eagles go somewhere else, there’s no eagles any more. I think a percentage of the people that came here initially come to see the eagles, but if the food source is not there the eagles are going to go somewhere else, so you then haven’t got that environmental asset. That food source is gone, they’re going to go somewhere else for their food.

I So the sea eagles are gone?

R1 No, they haven’t gone, but it’s just a matter of time before they do. They’re on [area 8] now and they’re kicking off, they’ve never had trouble ever with eagles on [area 8] but they’re getting hammered in the last few years, and it’s one of the few places that’s still got volume of sheep on the open hill ground, and there’s not loads of people going about. It is changing, it’s changing all the time and it’s getting a balance, if you want to keep that ecosystem and that environment and things like the eagles that are assets that people are coming here to look at because we get money off them while they’re here, it’s all a big fragile equation. But the environmental side of it means that it needs looked after, needs properly managed.

I Who do you think should be doing that?

R1 I’d rather the powers that be were keeping a sensible look on the thing, rather than the people on the ground fighting with the quangos that are in denial, like RSPB, SNH and all these kinds of people.

[pause in recording]

I You do see that tourists are part of your…

R1 You’re not in control because they’ve come up with a rule where people can go where they want to go. The access code thing, people can go where they want, they can’t trespass, you’re not actually in control of where people are going but they need managed, footpaths need maintained. A perfect example here as well, the walk that goes out to the [landmark 5] goes through ground that the Forestry’s responsible for. When they first did the forestry the money was there to put in a footpath, so they put the footpath in, but nobody’s been back to maintain it. So now the footpath is an absolute liability. Are they going to wait until someone breaks their leg?

There was a girl last year didn’t get very far at all when she broke her ankle and was airlifted out the place. A car sat down there for three days, I thought, three days at the bothy, I might just phone that car in and make sure somebody knows where she is. She had been [inaudible] hospital, she wasn’t even three-quarters of an hour from her car, she was airlifted out the place. Nobody knew she was gone, I just assumed she was at the bothy because she’d left her car. I had seen her with her pack, her intention was to go to the bothy but she’d been flown out.

Things like you’re saying about where to target the money, subsidy money and grants for planting trees, the money’s there to put a big digger in and dig everywhere up and put the trees in, but where’s the maintenance, where’s the follow-up? You have to put a path in, everybody starts using the path, everybody’s writing about the path and before you know it you’re inundated with walkers and the path doesn’t exist any more. It becomes a liability, who’s responsible for that, is it the landowner, is it the agency that’s running the forestry joint on top of it, is it the farmer that’s running his farm on that?

It’s alright coming up with money for grants and money for this and that, but it’s money to follow-up and look after it which is really important. The path going out to the [landmark 5] is an embarrassment. If they’d actually looked after it it wouldn’t have cost a fraction of what it’s going to cost to go and fix it now. If there was somebody every year maintained the drains, path was great when it was first built, little culverts put in it and the drains, if somebody took the time every year to maintain that you wouldn’t then have to put a digger in and start digging more gravel out. It’s having that money thereafter these great schemes that they come up with to actually maintain them. It’s the same when they’re planting the trees, they’re not here environmentally.

I Can you walk around the coast to get to the [landmark 5]?

R1 Down on the cliff edge? Again it’s ground that’s been shut off from grazing and if you think the open hill’s hard to walk on, try and walk up through the heather along the clifftops, if you step over there there’s no point in airlifting you. I’ve walked it a few times and it’s hardgoing, because there’s no tracks in amongst it, the animals have been excluded from it so you haven’t got the natural walkways.

I Is there anything you wanted to say you’ve not had a chance to say?

R1 No, I don’t think so. I think we’re custodians is all we are. We’re not here for very long in the big picture and I think we have a duty to look after what we’ve got. I think farming and crofting and all the rest of it needs to be protected because it’s not just the financial gain for individuals in this moment in time, it’s actually maintaining those bits of ground. The place looks like what it looks like and it’s how it is because it’s been maintained that way. If you leave it people are going to stop coming to [area C] if half of them go home with lyme’s disease or they’re breaking their ankles or trying to get to [landmark 6] and they’ve crashed their car, all the hired cars with no spare wheels in them, and they’ve got to go back to Inverness to get a tyre for their car, it’s just going to put people off.

It’s madness, these kind of central hubs, if you want the rural places to thrive you have to put the services back into them, not skimp on them any more. With the roads, the Council, somebody in Inverness that says whether the gritter goes out, sheet ice here for three days, the gritter gets round to coming round [inaudible] the last 24 hours, you’re not needed any more. Things need to happen locally, from every aspect, it has to come from the ground but it’s particularly talking about. There’s no point somebody coming in surveying the roads on [area C] if they don’t take a run down to [landmark 6], although must of the roads are great, thousands of cars trying to get to [landmark 6] cause an absolute chaos.

For the local economy it’s an absolute disaster because it takes people hours to get in and out of [area 11] in the summertime, and when they get there it’s a liability. Everybody’s going to [landmark 6] and there’s nothing there, the lighthouse was decommissioned, it’s all smashed up and looks horrible, it’s an embarrassment. The Council put in a big carpark last year, your car’s going to be wrecked before you even get to the carpark because they’ll not fix the road.

Once you leave [area 1] it’s like going to a third world country, the roads are a joke. Again it’s maintenance, don’t wait until the road’s completely knackered, why’s somebody not walking the road in the wintertime when there’s water running, get the water off the roads, it’s not difficult. If the water gets the chance to run off the road you’re not going to have big holes and bits getting washed out, but there’s not that maintenance. This great attitude of waiting till it’s broken before you fix it is such a false economy, employ somebody in [area 11] to maintain that road in the winter, don’t rely on someone coming from wherever, when they get round to it and they’ve got the money to get round to doing it.

I Thank you very much.

End of transcript