ResULTS project: case study C, interview 195

Face to face interview with crofter, conducted 23/2/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

I Can you tell me about what you’re doing here? You’ve obviously got a croft.

R Two. I’m a crofter and my family’s been on this croft probably since it was created a croft 100 plus years ago, so my children are the fifth generation on this croft. I’ve been active in crofting since I was 20. I am the chairman of our general grazings committee, that committee represents seven crofting townships but we have an affiliated other three crofting townships, so we represent, we’re the voice as it were for the crofters here on numerous committees and groups. I also am a member of NFU Scotland’s Crofting Highlands and Islands Committee, so I sit on the Crofting Highlands and Islands Committee as one of the representatives of the [area C] branch of NFUS. I am actively involved in deer management, I’m a member of the [area C] Deer Management group on behalf of the crofters here.

I was for the last three years heavily involved in the sea eagle stakeholder group here until I resigned in protest at SNHs mismanagement and incompetence. SNH have completely failed to address the issues of sea eagle predation on livestock on [area C], they continually claim to be working with stakeholders and the stakeholders, ie crofters, are in a worse position than they were four years ago when they started. There is no proposals on the table that give crofters any comfort that there might be a solution to these issues in the future, and at the moment we’re being led down the garden path, the Scottish Government’s being led down the garden path being told that there are proposals, there are management proposals on the way, but none of these trials that SNH…

If you go to SNH and asked what they’re doing about sea eagles, they would tell you they are trialling methods to deal with the issue, these methods were shown to be totally unacceptable or unusable here a few years ago, and they’re still trialling them. They’ll never work, there’s not a solution, but the truth of the matter is SNH is terrified of the might of the urban environmental lobby that is driving policies for all these things. Scottish Government, MSPs, they’re elected, it’s that same urban middle-class environmentalists who ask the question, do you think sea eagles are lovely and they say, of course they are, so you have a survey that shows everybody thinks sea eagles are lovely.

It’s one of these things, it’s not unique to sea eagles, it’s deer, beavers, geese, the policies are driven to, all the policies and the management of all these species are driven through the management of the crofters and farmers on the land. We have to accommodate these species’ interests that, irrespective of the detriment it’s doing to crofting and farming here. It’s a very divisive issue, within communities, within areas, within society it’s a divisive issue but until the politicians acknowledge that the majority cannot continue to expect to benefit from the work that the minority crofters and farmers do in protecting your environment, and expect those crofters and farmers to be paying the cost of it all the time, because that’s what we do.

I How big an issue is predation by sea eagles?

R Huge.

I Is that with sheep?

R Sheep, yes. It’s a very big issue in [area C]. For me personally not a thing but for the people I represent there’s a lot of them. The nearest issue we’ve had, they come and sit on that tree, it’s not like they’re a rare thing. I can give you reports that show evidence of losses to one of our most impacted shareholders, but because it’s… When people get impacted it can be quite catastrophic, not only is it an impact on your croft, loss of money, give the crofters more money, but it’s an impact seeing your work, the livestock damaged and killed and injured, you’re seeing, there’s mental stress, you get under stress because you think what am I going to see the next time I go out to the hill. If you have a solution to a problem you can deal with it but if there is no solution because you’re not allowed a solution of any sort, it’s very difficult to deal with it.

That follows on from your geese, which are becoming an escalating problem here, deer which have always been a problem here. You have a solution to these two things because you can actively interact with these species but if you go down the road of beavers and badgers and ravens and sea eagles, there isn’t really a solution that you can take on-board yourself because they are all species of special worth and you get carted off to jail. It’s one of the reasons that the resilience of crofting and hill farming is under threat, is because of the pressures put on it to accommodate interests that are outwith the actual food chain, the actual production of sheep and cattle, which is what crofting and farming is about, is being completely swept aside to accommodate the interests of the wider environment.

People will say, he hates the environment he hates animals, but I don’t, I and people like me live and work on the environment, it’s our environment and it’s the environment that we live and work in, and it’s an environment that we understand but the policies are not driven by that grass roots knowledge. That grass roots knowledge is continually ignored or vilified in fact, or treated with contempt by those who wish to pursue their own very specific agendas, whether that’s reforestation, rewilding, reintroduction of species, all these things are driven by very vocal, very eloquent organisations who see their goals as more important than the life and wellbeing of the people who actually live and work here.

I You said you had PhD students studying the sea eagles, have you any hope that they might come up with some kind of management…

R They won’t come up with a management thing, both the studies are to do with… One is a student who is at university [inaudible] he’s doing one on the impacts of sea eagles and species reintroduction on social and economic structure here. The other one is more specific, it’s to do with how SNHs management in the sea eagle stakeholder groups, work or not work. Neither of them are seeking solutions, they’re seeking to explain why there isn’t a solution, why there’s an interaction.

The fellow from University College London has done 50 or 60 interviews, all over [area C] and the west coast. The other one is from [inaudible]. These are PhD, they’re doing that research and they get their PhD at the end of it. Both of them are committed to giving us here an overview of it for our own use. We find that quite often have these chats and that’s the end of it, you have no idea what’s happened to that information, where it’s gone, who’s seen it, who’s heard it, and you get more and more jaundiced about it all. I’ve done endless consultations over the years, for lots of organisations not just something like yours, we’ve done it with the Scottish Government, we’ve done it with the UK Government, you explain the facts of life to them and they just come up with an answer that has no bearing on [inaudible] at all.

I I’m hoping we can do better, we’ll try to do better.

R It’ll be interesting to see what you come up with when you come up with it, you can always email me a copy. We did a power of work here with [person 10] who did a very detailed research project here on the environmental impacts and decline of hill farming, I don’t know if you’ve seen it. It’s on SNH, you can’t find it very easily because they’ve hidden it, SNH didn’t even want to publish it because it said things they didn’t want to hear, like crofting and farming is actually very important for the environment and it’s under serious threat. One of the case studies was on here, on the south end of [area C], so that’s only, and we did a lot with him. But that showed then the resilience was under threat because even then there was a 40-50% decline in livestock here, and that was having a catastrophic effect not only socially and economically but also on the environment.

We’ve seen massive environmental changes here in the last, through the removal of livestock. If you have a grazed managed hill with livestock on it you have certain species, if you remove the livestock that habitat changes completely, it goes to rank vegetation [inaudible] scrub birch but mostly it just goes to rank heather and whatever, the species that had been on it disappear. Most of those species are your BPS, your British Priority Species, your upland waders, stuff like that, and they all are disappearing here because of the drive for reforestation and for woodland expansion. You see huge areas of hill that were previously grazed being taken, livestock being taken off in this mythical belief it’s going to regenerate trees that are going to be of some benefit, but it just doesn’t happen, and you end up with… Habitat that has existed here for 100s of years, which is your open grazed moorland is destroyed, and the species dependent on it are moved out of it. And that is something that people don’t fully understand.

When you come up to [area C] and you look at [landmark4] or whatever, they are historically a manmade, everybody thinks that’s a wilderness, it’s not, it’s a manmade environment, it’s managed and made by men, sheep, cows and a box of matches. If you take that out of it you lose it. So the environment that they come to see is manmade and it’s managed by men, and if you take the humans and the livestock out of it you are going to change that seriously. They think, it will be nice to have some trees, but if you go and look at any, I defy you to find one of these environmental, these woodland regeneration schemes where the tourist, the visitor whatever can actually see the mountains now, because it’s just a block of birch trees that nobody can walk through, nobody can access, you can’t see off the road.

That wasn’t like that 25 years ago, it wasn’t like that 20 years ago and it’s very difficult to see what you saw as a productive hill with 1000 sheep on it and maybe two shepherds on it, now as a scrub wasteland with nobody on it and nobody benefiting from it. That’s been driven by the biggest threat to crofting, which is the policymakers not having the nerve to make policies.

I What would an ideal resilient environment look like for you?

R It would look what it should be, which is properly managed grazed moorland with sheep and cattle on it which we can go and look at. If you want me to, there’s plenty of it, whether it’s in the right places and where people are going and managing livestock, moor burning, gathering the sheep, making something out of what is a limited resource of hill. What it would not be is, deer fencing enclosure with scrub birch bracken and brambles, which nobody is making any money off once the 15 year payment for fencing it off is up, that land is gone forever, it has no value after that.

I’m not against trees and commercial forestry, commercial woodland is a crop, whatever your view of Sitka and all these things, they are a crop, they are supporting a massive industry in this country. It’s a crop, they cut the trees, they harvest the trees, all that, that is a use being put to that plant. But where you see the enclosure of land for natural regeneration, which is what a huge amount of land here is being taken out of production for, there’s no end use to it because all the mythical stories about biomass and harvesting that’s just fairy stories, there isn’t a market for those trees, there isn’t a use for them other than a basic sort of use.

So you see those areas which were productive in my view, which were producing some level of livestock, were producing some level of employment, are now doing neither. There’s a perceived benefit to the wider public because somebody’s deluded enough to think they’re actually going to get to walk through it. The losses outweigh any benefits to that tentative management. In my view, if you take the crofting situation here, a managed common grazings which has active crofters working on that ground, producing livestock that’s what I believe it should be. But that is absolutely contrary to an awful lot of the voices trying to drive policy at the moment.

I To what extent would you see tourists as a crop? How would they fit in?

R Tourists are a crop, tourists are very important, but tourists come to see crofting. Tourists come to see cows and sheep on a croft, tourists do not come to be excluded from walking up the hill because of deer fences and woodland enclosures. Tourists do not come to see rank vegetation, tourists do not come to see wildfires burning through these areas because there hasn’t been any grazings management. Tourists were coming here for decades to see the crofting lifestyle on the west coast, they were not coming to see what we’re being driven to now which is huge areas of abandoned hill with no livestock on it.

If you stop any tourist, what are they looking at, they’re looking at the beautiful view and the lovely sheep and cows, they’re not looking at when you drive up to [area 12] and the deer fence is right beside the road at [inaudible] and that whole hill is just thick birch trees, they’re not looking at that, they’re wondering why they can’t see the sea any more because the view’s been blocked off. Any suggestion that tourism would be depleted by, tourism without crofting here would be less. The majority of tourists here come to see the [landmark4] and cows and sheep, that’s what they’ve always come to see, and stay in a quaint wee crofting township. That’s what they’ve come to see, that’s what’s not going to be here next year or the year after if the policies continue.

I Where’s the area you’re referring to where they couldn’t see the sea any more?

R There’s one example. All this here. This map is so out of date. This is all woodland regen, this is all planted, and this is all to be replanted, this is just going to be harvested and replanted. All this is a woodland enclosure, there’s no livestock on that at all now and that used to have 1000 ewes and 100 cattle on it. If you drive up that road now it hasn’t grown up yet but it will soon be, but that’s already been cleared. All this here, along here, that’s all cleared. But that’s got nothing to do with resilience has it.

I This is some information about how people understand resilience. The first one is you absorb change, so you take less salary or whatever, the second is you start making minor amendments, you might build a barn to keep your sheep in, and the next one is that you transform a thing, it could be energy production, it could be going into tourism. Do any of those make sense to you?

R We cannot continue to absorb the pressures that we’re under. We cannot continue to absorb the payment cuts, the threats of payment cuts, the continual uncertainty on payment cuts, that is very difficult so very few people are doing nothing. Most people have absorbed as much as they’re going to absorb I think and if the continual threats of… It’s very difficult to run a business when you don’t know what your bottom line’s going to be, and the last few years that has been worse than ever, with the LFASS threats and with the basic payment cuts.

We had shareholders here within our common grazings who, when the single farm payment was changed to basic payment recently, had cuts of up to 40%. That is not sustainable for anybody, and then after those cuts we’re now facing possible further cuts to the LFASS. We’ve probably seen in the last ten years here cuts of 50% across the board, and that level of cuts is not stopped. So it’s very difficult for any business here that’s so dependent on the store market particularly to absorb that. On top of that you’ve seen cuts in, though we’ve seen very volatile markets over the last while, again you’re seeing cuts, that’s difficult to absorb. Not if you take the individual ups and downs of it, that’s not difficult, it’s this continual having to absorb support payment cuts or market dropping or whatever, that’s very difficult if there’s never an upside. If you continue year on year to see that continual decline it’s difficult to continue to see how you’re going to do it. When you take this year…

There you go, raven, two of them, if you’re lucky a sea eagle might fly past as well. I’ve seen two of them playing with one sitting on the rock and the other doing circles, my wife and I have seen that. That’s beautiful. I’ll show you pictures of the sheep and the lambs, that’s not beautiful. People think, there’s this really vociferous anti-crofting position taken by the more extreme environmental lobby in this country, an anti-crofting and anti-farming voice that thinks… These things are all perfectly entitled to be here but people have to understand if they’re here and causing an issue here, it’s not for me to be bearing the burden of it to accommodate your perception of a beautiful bird. But they think, the crofters want to kill them all.

We’re complying with everything that we’re asked to comply with, we are not shooting the Schedule 1 birds, we are not poisoning the Schedule 1 birds, but we’re not given any credit for that we’re just vilified for being anti them, anti these things. We’re not anti these things, we’re anti the impacts they have on us. If the birds were vegetarian nobody would… But the thing is if the birds were vegetarian, if they were black grouse or if they were capercaillie your RSPBs and SNHs would be doing nothing to protect them. They’ve done nothing to protect them, which is why both those species are on the verge of extinction in this country, but they are not on the verge of extinction because crofters and farmers have been out poisoning them all, because they don’t eat sheep, that’s the bottom line of it. But these species, because they’re not that iconic high revenue turnover, we’re protecting the sea eagle give us a donation, they don’t get the front page, they don’t get the support. A black grouse is a beautiful thing to see, they’re almost finished in this country, but that’s got nothing to do with crofting and farming.

I We’ve seen one capercaillie.

R That’s how rare they are. Now those birds are not, even things like, if they reintroduce the lynx, you’ve got these extremely vocal, we’ve got to have lynx to kill off all the deer apparently and you think where’s your animal welfare there. But nobody is looking at the Scottish wildcat, they look at it and say it’s nearly extinct, we might have to do something about that, but they’re not doing anything about it because it’s not the headline grabbing cat, though it’s absolutely beautiful when you see one close up, they are beautiful but they’re not that high-profile. They don’t understand that, the RSPB and Woodlands Trusts and Lynx Reintroduction Trusts, everybody but save the crofter trust, they don’t understand that the people who created this environment, who live and work on it every day are bearing a huge cost for their little hobby.

I can’t comprehend that somebody thinks we should be reintroducing lynx to this country, not because of the impact it will have on the sheep, but because what they’re saying isn’t going to work, the lynx are not going to replace deer stalking in this country, they’re not going to control the deer population in this country, there’s more deer run over by cars than the lynx could ever kill and that’s having no impact on population.

There’s a naive or wilful view that people who don’t actually in my view understand Scotland, think that they know better than the people who actually live and work here. It’s very difficult when you for 40 years have been seeing that continual erosion of the traditional land management to accommodate… We went from, it’s all driven by policy, the Common Agriculture Policy gets the blame for an awful lot and then everybody says the Common Agriculture Policy led to overstocking of livestock and overgrazing of the hills. That’s hearsay, the evidence wasn’t actually there at the time, there was some overgrazing in some areas but across the whole of Scotland that was utter nonsense to suggest that there was overgrazing.

Because of the perception that this policy had done this damage, they go to the complete other end of the equation and say, we’ll pay you if you don’t use any cows or sheep when you go to the single farm payment. Not only will you not have to pay anything, we’ll pay you to put the sheep off and you’ll be getting paid £27 a ewe to put your sheep away off the hill for X number of years, and that went to the other extreme. You’ve got now undergrazing, there’s no sheep on there, we’ll fence it off and we’ll grow trees on it, it’ll never grow a commercial crop we’ll just let it grow some scrub birch and pretend that that’s a good thing.

If your policy is to produce a Scottish crofting environment that is resilient to all the global changes there are coming to us, global warming, Brexit, all these things, you have to have holistic coherent approach that gives crofters and farmers some level of where are we meant to be going, what is the end goal, what is the opportunities for us to meet that end goal. That’s never been produced in my 40 years crofting.

I What would you see as the end goal?

R From my perspective, I would like to see Scotland on a whole making proper use of the land resource it has. Some of that is forestry but for the Scottish Government to set arbitrary 10,000 hectare a year targets, they’ve no idea where they’re going to put those 10,000 hectare a year. That’s another example of one solution to one wee thing but it impacts everything. It needs to put in place, there needs to be proper use made of all land. Land is a finite resource and we cannot continue to allow it to be misused, to be abandoned, to be not put to… I was going to use that purposeful use thing but in my view land should be used for agriculture production, livestock production or forestry, commercial forestry. You can put areas of it to habitat but these habitats can be managed with livestock. The exclusion of livestock from huge areas of Scotland isn’t protecting that environment because it just means that then becomes a huge area reserved for deer, and it’s still [inaudible]

So they need a joined up policy between species management and livestock management, and habitat managements that make for those doing the job on the ground, make it that they are fairly reimbursed for what they’re producing, what they’re providing. If that is providing a grazed open moorland managed habitat for upland species, for grouse, for waders and for public access that people can walk about on, as they do, and for the tourist.

The tourism industry benefits from all the work we do but doesn’t pay anything for it. The tourism industry here just sucks money into itself, it doesn’t… Say I get £10,000 for [inaudible] that £10,000 doesn’t go off into my Swiss bank account, it’s recirculated in this community, I pay [inaudible] and I pay the guy that drove the lorry to the mart, I pay the mart, I pay the shop down the road for my messages, all these things are recirculated, they are part of the economy here. Huge amount of the money that comes in from tourism doesn’t get recirculated, it’s into people who work here for seven or eight months of the year in their B&Bs and then go off to their villa in Corsica for the winter. That money is not circulated so much in the community but that huge tourist industry is benefiting from having ravens, sea eagles and sheep and cows and habitats for people to walk on, but it’s not paying a single penny towards the maintenance of that thing that they’re coming to see.

That’s where there needs to be an understanding that if all these industries, if your tourism industry, if your environmental protection industry, if they’re all going to be taking a slice of the cake they have to understand that they can’t be taking it all out of my pocket. We as crofters and farmers who are doing the work need to be, there needs to be an understanding of what that involves. If you wanted to have even partially get back to what this country is capable of producing, for your food security thing, you’re going to have to change something radically because at the moment you are not going to have any crofting and farming up here in the near future because there is no way people would continue to put their hand in their own pocket to do it. That’s where we’re getting to, they’re subsidising, most crofters are more and more subsidising agricultural side of crofting from their non-crofting activities, and that’s a recipe for, why am I doing this, it’s costing me money I’m not going to do it any more.

I From your role in the NFUS, is this a specific issue to do with crofting or is it a wider agricultural issue?

R Agriculture in Scotland across the board is not valued for its, it’s not valued in this country at all. We are not, crofters and farmers, hill farmers, crofters, even arable, they are not valued by society, they are seen as in many cases they’re vilified by a section of society that blames us for everything. There is more resilience to that in certain sections of Scottish agriculture because they have [inaudible] barley, people are going to drink whisky and they’re more secure, but we’re being driven more and more to be seen to be providing this public good and this wider environmental benefits, and that’s where we’re not even being credited with the work that we already do, and yet we’re being told we have to do more and more. Why, why would you?

If you take the sea eagles, if you go into a sea eagle management scheme you have to comply with, it’s a sea eagle management scheme but it’s not, it’s a crofter management scheme. The crofter is changing his management to accommodate a bird that he never asked for, to accommodate the interests of other people in that bird, to have that bird there for your tourists to see occasionally or whatever, the crofter has to change his management to do that, but the amount of money he’s given to do that doesn’t cover it.

I What sort of management changes does he have to make?

R Things like, here say ten years ago the bulk of sheep would be lambed in the hill, they would be, hefted hill flock are lambed on the hill. SNHs requirement, obviously SNH think all lambs are culled at birth, that’s RSPBs view, they take a few sick weakly lambs at birth so therefore if you remove the lambs from the eagles at birth there’s not going to be any problem. So you have to take all the sheep in to [inaudible] They’re a very limited resource here if you’re in-bye, if you’ve got, no crofter would have sufficient in-bye to carry his hill flock. So SNH say we’ll compensate you for the extra shepherding work and the extra feed costs. So you’re doing more work, you’re spending more money to accommodate a management thing that you didn’t want to do because it’s never been necessary for you to do it, to accommodate SNH and RSPBs desires to have this bird flying about here.

The cost of those management things have never been quantified, they take no account of the variations in feed costs in a year, like this year has seen horrendously high feed costs, but there’s no variation in that, so any crofter who went into the scheme three years ago on a three year old budget which wasn’t high enough anyway, is now seriously impacted because they’re not getting compensated for the extra feed costs of taking the sheep off the hill. They’ll say, but you’ll have more twins and the sheep will be better. They totally fail to understand that hill sheep shouldn’t have twins, they’re supposed to have a single and they’re supposed to efficiently rear a single lamb on the hill.

So you’re changing the sheep’s normal hefted behaviour, you’re changing the crofter’s workload, you’re changing the food, you’re increasing the carbon footprint because you’re having to bring in more feed stuff, and none of that is compensated for by the pittance that they’re giving you. But if you don’t go into that scheme, you get nothing. This scheme is predicated on this totally wrong understanding that eagles only kill small sick lambs, sea eagles kill 12 months of the year sheep up to 60 kilo adult ewes. So almost all the losses here occur after lambing when the lambs go back to the hill when they’re six weeks old, so the whole scheme’s farcical because they’re paying for something that isn’t having any impact and they’re not providing a solution to what the impacts are.

I have been through this so many times with SNH and RSPB. RSPB will never change their view that the sea eagle is more valuable than I am, and that is always going to be their view, the bird is more important than the human being. And that is a real issue if you’re supposed to be sitting at the table seeking solutions, when somebody views a bird that isn’t endangered anywhere in its range, it’s not an endangered species, the white tailed sea eagle’s range goes from here to Japan and in that whole range it’s not endangered.

I You said some interesting things about policy, that you take part in a lot of different consultations and nobody was listening, is that specifically to do with sea eagles?

R No, that’s everything. The Scottish Government and Westminster, but the Scottish Government particularly, its answer to any problem is to have a consultation, because by the time they’ve had the consultation they hope the problem’s gone away and they don’t have to come up with a solution. You can go across the board, any question that comes up they will say we have to consult with stakeholders. If you look at crofting, the crofting cross-party group on crofting, if you look at the number of stakeholders on that, it’s 30-something. There are 30 plus organisations sitting with the Scottish Government’s cross-party whatever, 30 organisations expressing a view on how I should live my life.

I So those are not crofters?

R No, things like Food Scotland or SNH, RSPB, Woodlands Trust, Church of Scotland, [inaudible] Land Scotland. Of that 30, ten I would say may have a right to express some sort of comment, there’s ten who I have no idea why they’re there and there’s ten who in my view are pursuing their own anti-crofting agenda. But the Scottish Government gives them all equal say, not on anything other than how I have to comply with their wishes. Nobody else has to comply with the views about anybody else, other than the law. I have to comply with the same laws and then I have to comply with the crofting laws.

I You were talking about everybody is now moving towards making some more dramatic changes and I wonder if you have some examples of the types of things that people are doing.

R They’re giving up. One of the biggest hill farmers in [area C] put their sheep off because of the sea eagle, and that’s radical changes to do with failure of policy of the Scottish Government.

I What are they doing now?

R They’ve stopped having sheep, expanding their tourism. If you take things like learn and adapt through incremental changes, there’s an arrogance to that to suggest that crofters you have to teach the monkeys how to shell the nuts. Crofters know what they’re doing, crofters have adapted, we have followed every single change there’s been in my entire career, we’ve been cutting-edge of taking development forward, of taking advice and understanding advice, but there is only a limit to what you can actually do with a croft.

People will say, you can grow vegetables, on you go, if you like growing vegetables that’s fine but almost every poly tunnel that’s ever been put up here has blown away, and where’s the market, people still go to the Co-Op to buy carrots and onions and these vegetables because they want a reliable regular source. There are one or two very successful horticultural businesses but they have their market, that market cannot be applied across 20,000 crofts, there isn’t a market for that.

You can transform through radical change, through renewable energy. We were one of the first common grazings, or one of the first communities to try to put in place a renewable energy project. We as crofters and with our landlords, we had before anybody else thought about renewables, we had a renewable project with one of the major UK energy providers. We were looking at putting 23 1.5mw turbines on our hill, we had everything in place, we had it all ready to go, and it would have brought 100s and 1000s a year into this community, and this is 15 years ago.

What stopped it, the failure of the Scottish Government to promptly and appropriately deal with the intermittent connector and the grid upgrades. Those grid upgrades that would allow us to have done that here are still not in place. The other thing that stopped it, eagles, because an eagle might have got killed. In the 25 years projected loss of the eagles was 1.5, but that and the failure of the Scottish Government to address that [inaudible] and to address the upgrades which are still not finished now 15 years later, made it impossible for us to continue to drive that project forward.

Whoever stopped it we didn’t get it, all I know is we didn’t get it. And then at a local level, on the hill here, we tried to put in place a small-scale renewable energy project. That was stopped by Highland Transport Planning because it would have impacted on the amenity value of one person. That one person wasn’t a crofter, wasn’t local, all the other locals and crofters supported it, that one person very vociferous anti-crofting individual was determined that the crofters, me particularly, was not getting the benefit of this. After it was all stopped, what did they do, sold their house for half a million and left.

So you’ve got a transient population here who are not, it’s a large transient population who come here, live here for five, ten years, see the asset value of their property sky rocket because of the property values here that are that way, get to where they want to be, decide it wasn’t a good idea living here anyway, and sell up and go away. In that five, ten years they’ve done considerable damage some of them to this community.

I What about the market for sheep and lamb?

R There are some efforts to expand that with the [area C] mutton project. But the actual issue here is the crofting system does not produce finished lamb, crofting system produces store lamb, and there is a very efficient system for the production of store lamb and that store lamb will enter the national thing. It’s a very naïve view to think that you could, and there are those who say just sell your lambs locally. I’d have to sell 150 lambs, to set up a process I have to fatten 150 lambs, that’s a huge change in my process [inaudible] that increases my workload, that increases my feed costs, you’d have to have a fairly significant uplift in your market just for that but then you’d also have to take it… You just go online and market it yourself, you’ve still got to cut it, package it, sell it direct and find a customer. That for most crofters is not worth a candle because you’ve got a limited resource of time.

There are people who do that very successfully and there are people who have a niche for 20 lambs, I could sell 20 lambs tomorrow if I wanted to, but it’s the extra work and the extra uncertainty of… There’s talk of this new abattoir if it goes ahead, that they would buy the lambs and market and process them. I was asked 20 years ago if I would supply lambs to the [hotel 1] Hotel. That’s brilliant but when you actually looked at it they wanted 20 racks of lamb a week, what do you do with the other two-thirds of the sheep, you’ve got to have a market for that. It’s not as simple, there are opportunities but it’s not simple to go down that road, and it’s not simple even with cattle to, if you kill a cattle beast it’s a big thing, you have to secure your market. Whereas if you’ve got a cattle beast ready to hang up and you take it to Dingwall, you know you’re going to get a price on that day you get your money and that’s it. You might not make as much money but you’ve not as much difficulty.

That’s one of the things, if you look at the drivers behind a lot of these projects like local source, even the [area C] mutton thing, I’m not sure how that will go. It’s a very good idea that these hotels are all going to commit to selling, buying, paying a higher premium for mutton but mutton itself is not a simple thing. Here most people that have, mutton is a broad church, legally it’s anything from a year old but most people’s mutton here are cast ewes which are five or six years old, and you’re just killing a couple of fat ewes for yourself, very few people keep the traditional two and three year old wedder any more, the odd one. But to change your structures to accommodate that on the chance you might sell five or six of them, or ten of them, is quite a big process change. You’re still relying, if you keep that lamb now, a lamb you could sell say in Dingwall today for £70, if somebody says if you keep it another 12 months or two years I’ll give you £170 for it, but then you’ve got the killing costs and the cutting costs and the feeding costs to get it there, it’s not as straightforward, it’s not necessarily going to add up the way they’re thinking because you’ve only got to lose one or two of them and your profit’s gone.

To change the whole of crofting to get to where the Scottish Government’s targets for crofting, 95% occupancy and full use of all common grazings and all this is nonsense, it’s never going to happen. What you want is, those who are committed to it, who are committed to trying to do it, need to be given support to at least not be costing them money to do it. Yes, if you have 20 Hebrideans and you’ve got 20 friends that all want to buy one, you can do that. But for somebody with 50-60-300 lambs, that’s a totally different job.

They also haven’t taken on board that [area C] doesn’t produce the feed resource to finish them. The lambs go to the east coast and they go to the stubble farm fields and they go to the barley fields and they go to the guys that have got the feed. If you don’t take the lambs to the feed you have to bring the feed to the lambs because there isn’t the feed here to do it. You’re not going to finish lambs here on the hill, that’s physically impossible, that’s why they’ve always gone away, you have to have a shed, you have to have a feed supply, you have to have the time to feed them. Yes you can do it, and yes it’s been done very efficiently by two or three people who are set up for it, but they’re still putting the majority of their lambs to the market, to the [inaudible] sales, they only sell a tiny wee bit locally.

I You say a lot of crofters are giving up livestock, but you’ve got a very active grazing committee by the sound of it, how does that grazing committee work?

R The grazings committee is the smallest legally collected body in the world, we are by legally elected statute. The law requires all common grazings to have a grazings committee. That grazings committee is the elected representatives of the shareholders within the common grazings. Common grazings can be from one shareholder to 500, there are common grazings with 500 shareholders, our General has, we have 75 shareholders. The committee is elected to carry out the management of the common grazings on behalf of the shareholders, that’s all it does, but it’s up to the committee itself to decide what that management involves.

There’s not a book that tells you, there’s supposed to be but the Crofters Commission never gave us one, and they’re another reason there’s no resilience in crofting, they’re the biggest threat after geese and Brexit and tourism. They are a fundamentally flawed organisation who I have publicly called for the abolition of, they are a terrible incompetent organisation who has done more damage to crofting than probably anything else through their failures for a long time, but this new lot are worse than the old lot, this new Crofting Commission as opposed to the Crofters Commission, which it was before. We sent a document to Fergus Ewing, the Cabinet Secretary, a few years ago, calling for the abolition but they ignored it. The Crofters Commission are fundamentally flawed, completely incompetent and are nothing more than a vested interest that sees its continuation as more important for it than it is for crofting.

I What should they be doing?

R They should all be sacked, it should be abolished.

I No need to have such a body at all?

R I don’t believe there is, and I’ve laid it out quite clearly. Crofters should be given the same rights as any other individual to manage their own lives, they should not require big brother to tell them what to do, and big brother fail to do it most of the time. That’s not a view that would be held by everybody but it is the view of our committee, and it is the view that we’ve put in writing. The Crofters Commission had one task, and that was to ensure the continuation of crofting in a format that people would be happy with, and they failed to do that because there isn’t one, they have no…

I The grazings committee, that works quite well with the 75 shareholders?

R You’re elected. There’s 75 shareholders but there’s only probably 20 of them ever actually set foot on the common grazings because again the Crofters Commission have failed in their duty to ensure that people actually live here. I’m not saying they should live here, I don’t have an issue with absenteeism, I don’t have an issue with people living in London, I have an issue with their not allowing their land to be used, our committee ensures that the land for the most part is used, we have most of the land and the grazing shares are used. The Crofters Commission has never helped with that.

The issue is, each grazings committee is elected by its shareholders, that can be three or, in our township there’s only six shareholders and we’re all on the committee. It’s not a lot, the general committee’s more complex and our committee’s unique because when we were doing the renewable wind farm thing one of the things we had to sort out was for the shareholders, if they got money, if we hadn’t got money. So we went, we had to change our constitution to accommodate everything we needed, and we had to fight tooth and nail with the Crofters Commission to get what we as individuals wanted, democratically agreed by our shareholders, but it was contrary to what the Commission wanted.

So we ended up with the seven townships each have an elected committee that deal with the township matters, but anything that affects the whole lot of the seven townships because we all share the general, that’s managed by the general committee and that has one representative from each township. But that committee is not elected by all the shareholders, just the representatives that are, so we have a rolling committee, the members only change when the township changes them.

We’re a fairly strong committee, we have taken some fairly major actions that probably most committees would have shied away from because they were quite challenging. We halted the landlords’ rent review, we got the, the landlord has in some cases [inaudible] increases of up to 1000% for rents, but we fought them, we went to the press, the tv, fought them tooth and nail, and in the end we dictated the terms of the rent rise for all 100 shareholders, and it was across the board equal set out. That took a lot of effort, a lot of committees wouldn’t have done that.

We then took Scottish Water, we fought with Scottish Water for probably two years over their illegal access to our common grazings to manage their water treatment plant, and we had a terrible fight with them, again we were on the telly to show the damage they had done. In the end Scottish Water for two years repeatedly threatened us with court and we said take us to court, we’re happy for you to explain your behaviour to the Sheriff, and after two years they never did it and in the end backed down. That again is the management of the grazings but it’s a step up.

The most recent thing we did, we’ve just finished a 5.5km fence where we got the funding for that, £75,000, but it took us ten years to get the funding through various working with landlords and sorting stuff out and getting the funding to do that, so that we could access the grant for it and get the grant. That’s the level of management, but the actual nitty-gritty of what colour of cow you have, that’s not within the remit of the grazings committee.

I What would happen if you have an outbreak of sheep scab say, if somebody wasn’t treating their sheep properly, would that be an issue for the grazings committee?

R Yes, absolutely, because the grazings committee is in charge of, dictates when there’s gathering and what sheep have to be gathered and who has to be there. So any person who is not, any grazings committee should be managing when the gathering of the common grazings takes place because it’s not within the regulations, the regulations don’t allow an individual crofter to go and get his own sheep, technically, you can’t go gathering your own sheep because you could be stealing somebody else’s. So the grazings committee have the right to say all the sheep have to be gathered today, and they all have to be dosed and dipped and treated for sheep scab. That’s what would happen, there must be 15 years since we had sheep scab here, and that’s what happened then, we jagged the whole of [area C]. We had also taken part in trials with one of the [inaudible] manufacturer, and we arranged to jag all the sheep in [area 13] over a three week period to do that sheep scab trial.

It’s within the remit of the committee to deal with these issues, livestock disease and, but if somebody absolutely refused to do it then you have to take them to court. You can also do things like, if the individual doesn’t get their sheep, that sheep would be gathered, that sheep would be dosed, and the cost of doing that would fall to the person.

I What would be the one thing that somebody could do that would benefit crofters?

R Understand that crofters should have sole responsibility for… Give us more money, but that’s never going to happen. Accept the value that crofters are to the wider society and to the wider environment, to what benefits crofters do, and acknowledge that benefits properly, financially and through more than just lip-service, when they say crofting’s important, to back that up a bit, because they don’t really. And to actually understand the cost to crofters of complying with, or trying to address the issues of so many different interests.

That’s the difficult part, there needs to be a clear understanding at government level that if they want the perceived benefits of crofting, maybe they don’t but if they do they have to realise that there is quite a significant cost to the crofter to provide these mythical benefits to the wider community. We’re being driven from, you have to have as many cows and sheep as you can, and you have to do all these things, and then we’ve been driven from pillar to post since then to having, you have no cows and sheep, you don’t have to do anything, we’ll pay you anyway as long as you manage the land, whatever that is, to now you have to have cows and sheep but you have to manage the land the way we say, not the way you think is right or the way that has been right historically.

It makes it very, talking about the grazings committee and the Scottish Government’s flagship policy is environmentally the AECS policy, you would think that a grazings committee managing a common grazings of 2000 hectares, important to upland hill habitat with blanket bog and dry heath and wet heath and proper stuff on it. You would think that that grazings committee would be able to access support for managing that through AECS wouldn’t you? It’s virtually impossible for a grazings committee to have enough points through the structure of the scheme to tick enough boxes to actually get it, and you end up spending £2000 on a bet that you might get in. If you don’t have SSSIs and you don’t have exclusive control of the habitats and all these things…

We looked at putting together one, a moorland management plan and a deer management plan combined, which we thought we could carry forward and it would have been £10-15,000 we would have got a year, and we got the top SSE consultant in Inverness to look at it. We went through it all and it just wasn’t possible. We would have had to do so many things like treatment restoration and blocking drains and all these things, just to tick boxes, not to benefit the habitat or to benefit our businesses, just to tick enough boxes to get enough points to compete. Everything with the new agricultural policies is competitive, and you’re competing with, as a crofter here on a small croft you’re competing with somebody who’s got a lot of habitats and a lot of points, but it cost you the same to put the application in, you’re taking the same risks of failing to get your application through.

I don’t believe a competitive structure of the way it’s targeted, doesn’t work for crofters, very complicated for crofters, and the only people that really benefit from it are the SSE adviser and the other adviser, because the more complicated it is the less time, the less profit they’re going to do it personally, the more crofters are going to have to be paying for the services of SSE advisers, and other consultants. I don’t have any issue with that, it’s just that a policy that… Schemes and plans when I started this, LFASS and all these things, you didn’t need a consultant to fill them in but nowadays crofters are so scared of getting it wrong that they’re paying for consultants to fill them in. It takes a far larger percentage of the crofter’s support budget to have that consultant, in [person 8]s’ report highlighted that quite clearly, it takes a higher proportion of the crofter’s support payment to pay for the consultant than it does for a large arable farmer on the east coast. So, just to comply with or try to get into these schemes costs crofters more because of the smaller scale, or it makes it more difficult.

I believe grazings committees have a vital role in this but they’re not supported, they are not supported by the Crofters Commission and they are not supported by [inaudible] or the Scottish Government, they are not supported by them although they will tell you we are. Our grazings committee under the old single farm payment scheme, who probably uniquely in Scotland went through the process of purchasing our own entitlement and to manage the grazings. At the end of the single farm period we were claiming £10,000 a year I think it was, through the single farm payments scheme for the grazings committee, and we were using it for the management of the common grazings. We were covering the costs of all our shareholders through that management scheme.

To show how little policy takes into account common grazings and crofters, when it changed from the single farm payment scheme to the basic payment scheme, and that change came about because of the whole slipper farming, slipper crofting fiasco, our committee were classed as slipper crofters and we lost 90% of that payment, because we didn’t physically own the sheep. But we were managing the whole thing, probably uniquely in the whole of the scheme we were spending all the money on the common grazings, we weren’t spending it on fast cars, but we lost 90% of that payment. We actually lost 100% because to get the 10% that was left we would have had to comply with far more stringent rules and we thought it was just not worth it.

Every time there’s a change in policy crofters are adversely impacted because nobody understands, not NFU, not the Crofting Federation who are in my view worse than useless, they haven’t come up with a policy of any sort in the entire 40 years I’ve been crofting, they’ve never come up with a policy of their own about anything, all they do is attack everybody else’s. The Scottish Government, NFUS, Crofters Federation, none of them actually understand how decisions are being made impact on crofting, particularly on common grazings. We had a litany of cuts that were specific to crofters, solely because they were crofters, and that’s not right.

They did a thing when they changed to the basic payment, the three regions, they did a thing called common grazings averaging, which nobody knew about until they’d done it, this is [inaudible] Common grazings averaging, each area of land in Scotland has an area, Region1, Region2 and Region3, everybody’s regions were based on their LFASS entitlement, so if you were LFASSB you got Region2, except if you’re a crofter. If you were a crofter claiming common grazings, the common grazings entitlement was based on the average of the common grazings, so the most active crofters with the most livestock doing the most work had their new payment averaged with the least active and therefore they had cuts. If I had been a farmer, not a crofter, I would have all my land would be Region2, because my neighbour does nothing my land is Region3, and that makes a huge financial difference.

Time and again we’ve raised this, this was raised the second it was apparent what [inaudible] had done, it was raised by the previous President of NFUS directly with the previous Cabinet Secretary, and he was incapable of comprehending the issue. They say we’ve had this, they hand it to their official, their official had drawn up the policy in the first place so he’s not going to change it, and they say that crofter’s talking rubbish, we did modelling, that’s not what happened, 90% cuts, 40% cuts, 45% cuts, all to do with averaging.

They just do not put, every one of these organisations, RSPB, SNH, Scottish Government [inaudible] Crofters Commission, all say that crofting’s important, we have to support crofting, and none of them actually listens to crofters who know what the issues are. You’re not the first person I’ve said that to and if somebody listens to you, well done, because they won’t be listening to me.

End of transcript