ResULTS project: case study Ca, interview 214

Face to face interview with crofter, conducted 14/3/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

I Could you tell me about what it is you do?

R I’m more or less a full-time crofter here, I’m third generation on this croft. This used to be one big estate and it was all broken up 100 years ago, my grandfather came here after the First World War and then he passed on to my dad and my dad on to me. With crofting, the Crofter Reform Act, right to succession, which is a great thing, security of tenure. We’re quite fortunate here, we’ve got 200 hectares in one block, and we’ve got no common grazing, it’s all one unit, so a lot of other townships, the townships to the right, [area 30] and township to the north is [area 31], and there are nine crofts on each.

The machairs all used to be all open, common, now it’s all apportioned so the fairest way they did it, I’ll have this bit, you have this bit, so it’s very disjointed, the fields are all over the place, but they’ve got a great community. I’ve got 200 ewes roughly, 48 hoggs and about 40 breeding cows, and then heifers every year. The calves at three years old so you have three different age groups of heifers. It’s such a long drawn-out process to get your end product really.

I Is it all inbye?

R No, it’s varied. It starts right on the east side, like heathery moor ground and then the further you get to the shore it’s more fertile, and then when you’re on the shore it’s less fertile, just sandy soil. There’s such a variance, even in one field, it’s so difficult.

I How do you manage that?

R We drain and we [inaudible] fertilizer. It’s constant maintenance, we’re in an environmental scheme so we rotate fields, it’s like a big game of chess, you open this gate, close this gate to open that one, and move the cows from here to there. I think on the main machair area it fits in with what we do because we plough the machair, ten hectares are ploughable out there so we plant five hectares a year, two year on and two year off. So the cattle are wintered on the machair but by the time the corn is growing, it’s all arable silage, when that is growing we then take the cattle off, which in turn gives all the other biodiversity or whatever, and all the other plants to grow and seed. Then when we’ve cut the corn the cattle go back in and all the plants have flowered and seeded. So it works in with what we’re doing and we have a huge number of birds, we’ve got no foxes, stoats, badgers, beavers, so the ground nesting game and waders just thrive.

I A bit like [inaudible] New Zealand?

R Yes, the same. In these areas here, myself and my two neighbours work together, we’ve got a machining group together and we start in the south and work up. When I cut a field here last year I counted 537 lapwings on one field, and it’s a pleasure to see. We all work with them, so we try and look after the biodiversity and whatever. It’s all linked really, a lot of people in the offices don’t think it is linked but it’s all linked to the management. I know other crofts that aren’t used and there’s nothing on them, they just go rank. It’s a filter down effect, there’s so many things on this and that.

It’s a great way of life really. Self-employed, my wife works, two kids, 14 and 16, a boy and a girl, they’re interested in the ground but when you’re self-employed crofting you have to, when the kids were young growing up, I used to work in the abattoir, I used to do contract sheep shearing, contract fencing, grave digging. If you stay here you have to have your fingers in lots of different pies.

I Are you now full-time crofting you said?

R Yes, but what we’ve done, 2007 I think was that foot and mouth or BSE? 2005-2007, that time, we had no income because we were only getting 60p a kilo for our animals, for the beef, which is usually, now it’s £2.20 or £2.40 depending male or female, so we had no income. My wife and I, my father had just passed away and we said if we want to stay here we’re going to have to diversify. So we built a house next door, self-catering, and we got an ABDS, Agricultural Development Scheme diversification thing, so we built the house and it’s only in the last three years that we’ve built up our clientele. That complements our business in the croft.

Last year we purchased another house down the road because of Brexit, without our subsidies, I think Mr Gove has said that he’s going to stop all subsidies in 2023 or whenever, well if that happens in this area we might as well, we can’t survive without payments here because the growing season. So we purchased this other house and trying to develop the business a bit more, put more emphasis maybe on, because of tourism the islands are getting busier. You’ve got to try and look ahead a bit, so that’s what we’re going to do.

The cows, I’ve got roughly 50, we only have 40 calving but when you have 40 to the bull you never ever, I know other stats it’s about 85% weaning, because you’ve got so many empty, so if you’ve got 40 you’re roughly about 32 calves or something to sell. We want to keep five of them for, so you’ve only got 25 to sell, roughly. I think meat is far too cheap, I think it should be far more expensive because of the amount of effort that goes into it. 25 to sell, so my cheque is roughly, when I sell all the calves a year, I get about £22,000 roughly, because we’ll sell a few older cows that’ll top it up, and the cows here, I did an audit, it cost £1.67 a day to keep a cow on this croft, it’s roughly £500 a year, so that’s roughly £25,000.

I’m not making any money so if it wasn’t for your payments, but the minute that these payments go, the [inaudible] I pay Council Tax and all these things, in a rural area everything, all the habitats will disappear. It’s [inaudible] really, everything is intermingled and all together.

I What sort of cattle do you have?

R We’ve got a mixture, we’ve got Shorthorns, we’ve got Limousin, we’ve got Simmental, mostly Simmental cross.

I Do they sell well?

R Very well, yes. They calve just now, in February and March and then we sell them in October, and they’ll gain roughly a kilo a day, so we’ll sell them at about 350 kilos. That’s what the market wants is Continentals, so maybe looking forward in the future we maybe go back to the traditional, maybe more, less inputs.

I So do the Shorthorn need less input?

R I would say Shorthorn, Aberdeen Angus, yes. But you still need the growth rates because when you go to sell them in the mart nobody wants to buy them, unless they’ve got any sort of growth on them.

I Do you take them across to Dingwall?

R No, mostly in [area 22], we try to support the local mart here. I’m Vice Chairman in the mart so we try to encourage it as much as possible because a lot of other crofters are selling away and the more they sell away the less viable this one is, it’s so difficult. Going away isn’t, you’ve got to put them away and you’re losing a lot of body condition and whatever, and the expense of getting them away. We like just selling them in the mart here, which we appreciate the buyers coming because it’s a two day trip.

I Do you get a good number of buyers coming?

R We do usually, but it’s very varied. As you know with market trade is up down, very volatile so it’s difficult.

I But do you have regulars?

R Yes, most people will buy your calves this year and next year again. That’s good to see because you want them to do well. I think it takes about 15 tons of water to produce a kilo of beef, so that’s why we are so well-suited here, we have so much water. We can’t go to dairy or cereal on the west coast of Scotland here, I don’t think we can have anything else but livestock production, it’s [inaudible] area. I think animals are the only way we can utilise what we have here.

I And sheep, is that Blackface?

R No, Cheviot, and I put Suffolk and a Cheviot back on them.

I Is that a good lamb?

R I’m happy, yes. We have roughly 200 to the tup and we’ll have 260 lambs, I’ll keep 40 for replacement and then we’ll sell the rest. The fat ones go straight to Aberdeen, Turriff, straight to abattoir and usually I’ll sell them at 30 there, that’s usually just the singles, the big singles, and they’ll get about £85 a head.

I So you manage to get some fat?

R Yes, £85 a head fat, and then the store lambs will then just go through the local mart again and we roughly get about £55 a head for them.

I So your fat lambs, do you sell them later?

R No, we try and get them away in August before the price goes down.

I You must have some good grass?

R Yes, the Suffolks mature quicker. We’ve a neighbour up the road, we try and get a load between everybody, [inaudible] up the road usually has about 100 or so. A lot of people will have 20, 30 fat lambs but they don’t want to put them to the abattoir because they want to put them to the mart, say look at my lambs, showing off your stock in a way when you’re selling, and they don’t think it’s worth it. They’ll make £20 a head more by selling them fat. It’s very difficult to get people to work together.

I Do you [inaudible] replacement crosses, you’ve got a Cheviot ram as well?

R A Cheviot ram as well, yes. I just change the ram every couple of years.

I When we think about the food system we’re thinking about it quite broadly, not just the farmers and the crofters but we’re looking at the input for [inaudible] which sometimes are linked, so when you’re doing a fencing contract you’re providing an input, the marts, the slaughterhouses, the wholesalers, retailers, consumers, everybody in that chain. We’re thinking about all the biological material, the sheep and the cattle and the ground. Then you’ve got all these associated institutions, advice extension services, insurance companies, banks, all these kinds of bodies who are involved, QMS. Then there are other stakeholders who are not actually so much within the food system but they are either impacted by it or they impact it, people like the policymakers, environmental organisations or the energy companies who look into renewable energy.

R There’s so many things involved, isn’t there?

I When you think about resilience, what does that mean for you?

R Resilience in which way? I’d like to continue doing more or less what we’re doing. I think you have to have a bit of everything. I love the livestock, it is hard work, you’re up through the night or whatever but you have to be born and you enjoy doing it. We have a fantastic community, we all help each other and I can walk into any door of any house here and give me a hand and they’ll help you or vice versa. You can’t put value on that, it’s very important to me. And if there’s any illness people are there to help out, it’s great. But then people do keep themselves to themselves so you’re not on top of each other all the time.

The biggest issue that we do have here is the weather, the weather is definitely getting wetter, you have coastal erosion and the sea level rising, so this is going to have a huge impact on us because we’re so close to the sea. That’s one of the things, habitats will change. I’m sure people have mentioned geese before.

I Do you have a big issue with geese?

R We do, yes. There’s about 1000 Barnacles here in the morning. This is the other issue we have, the crofters that are actually working and trying to make a go of it, they are the ones that are getting stung because the geese are on their ground because they like the grass, like the other rank crofts that aren’t used it’s not palatable grass so they don’t like it.

I Are you doing this fodder grains as well, the barley, oats, rye?

R It’s usually just oats that we have, oats and then we will whole crop it [inaudible] same as the grass silage.

I Do you have to bring in a lot of feed for the cattle?

R Not really, I try to be as self-sufficient as I can. The only thing I take in is minerals, cake, the cows will [inaudible]. We fatten up the calves just at the weaning stage, so probably buy in about 15-20 tons between the sheep and the cows throughout the whole year.

I These are the three ways in which people have been thinking about resilience, one is about absorbing or buffering, so I guess tightening your belts. Then there’s adaptation through doing some incremental changes, maybe bringing in a Suffolk ram or ? different sort of breeding crosses. Then there’s about transforming through doing some kind of radical change, so your tourism business maybe would fit into that. Are there are other things that you think would fit into those categories? Do you think you do all of those?

R Yes, I would say so.

I You talk a lot about the birds, are they seen as part of your adaptation or is that just, how do they fit into the picture?

R When we have the grass for, forage for the livestock, we cut silage and the corncrake, we get a payment for the corncrakes so they are important as we get paid to look after them, and it’s cut in a friendly manner or whatever. Obviously if you get a payment for things it does encourage you to look out for them. We do try our best to look after things.

I Are they kind of integral to what you’re doing here?

R I would say so, yes.

I So it’s not an adaptation, it’s not that you’re doing it because of the environmental payments?

R No, they’ve always been here. They’ve been here for a reason, because of the habitats and the way it’s been managed. The numbers have gone down and obviously because of the changes in machinery over the years, in my father’s time implements were slower and they could get away easier, now unless it’s cut properly. The island is the way it is because of the way of it’s been managed in the past.

I Things like succession and respect for the community, community cohesion and so on, and there’s also public goods, whether that’s keeping genetic diversity or keeping natural landscapes. If I asked you to try and rank the top ones out of those, some of them are not going to be relevant but are there any that particularly resonate with you, that you think that’s really important we need to keep that?

R Quality of life is very important, work-life balance, that would be the [inaudible] there. You’re providing a food source for… The community of course is there. Diversity, yes. Reasonable workload, yes.

I If you can’t preserve all of those, what are the key ones that you really want to hang on to?

R To even stay here you have to have a profit margin because if you’re not successful in your business you would have to move away or whatever, so that’s probably number one, you have to have that then you move on from that. Reasonable workload, that’s very important the work-life balance. That then intertwines with the kids, a good upbringing and quality of schooling and whatever, so that’s obviously here. You’re providing the food and all the other things. Then off that, off having the food and all these habitats, that’s the biodiversity so it’s all linked.

I When you moved into doing your tourism, how were you able to do a different thing?

R We just had to, my wife’s good at, she does all the changeovers herself and I help, I do the grass and other bits and pieces. You just have to zone off time, it’s a Saturday changeover so when we were initially setting it up I was doing a lot of shearing and I wasn’t about, and it’s quite difficult with the kids being young and you’re pulled in different directions. Now the kids are older they’re good at helping, and we all have to be on-deck and on-hand on a Saturday to help because if we turned around. My wife works three days a week and the rest of the week she gets the bedding washed and changed and ready again, so it’s a big circle really. We like meeting people and telling them about our way of life, so it’s good, we really enjoy it, and it’s more income also.

I Did you have to learn some new skills when you were doing that?

R Not really. Initially we were doing the marketing ourselves, which we found trying to reach your customers was quite difficult and then obviously how the internet has evolved over the years. We’re now with an agency, so they do the bookings and they employ somebody to do the advertising and publicising, so that makes a huge difference to us. They take 15% commission which is pretty good but the issue that we had when we were doing it ourselves initially, we wouldn’t know what price to have. We were with the Tourist Board and they said we could be a 4 star but it’s up to yourselves to see how much you charge and when people would phone they’d say how much is it, and we were almost scared what to do. So the agency, when we went with them the first thing they said, you’re far too cheap. The onus is on them to get the money because we hate, islanders asking people for money it’s horrible, so that is so good it’s taken a weight off us being with them. They charge us 15% which I think is pretty reasonable for the amount of work that they do, with the admin and whatever.

I Do you get a good number of people?

R Yes, we have, the house next door, 30 weeks a year, which is good for the islands I would say. As I say, the islands are getting busier and busier, the main issue we have is the ferry, getting people across. We’ve learned by the house we’ve done by doing things differently.

I So you have learned some things in having started the thing?

R That’s right. Things have to be up to a reasonable standard because you want people to experience the place and have a good time.

I Is there links between what you’re doing agriculturally and what you’re doing with tourists?

R Not really. Some people want to keep themselves to themselves and it’s their house for the week and others will phone, what are you doing today, or some will want to see you shearing or whatever. They are interested.

I How do you find it when people want to see you shearing?

R Not a problem. We’ve had a couple of people that have stayed there and bought places in [area 32] and built a house. They enjoyed their time but then they’ve gone. Some people get the islands and some don’t. Some people find a pull that holds you and other people don’t like it and don’t want to experience it again.

I Do you think there’s something unique about [area 20] that [inaudible].

R I think each area has their own, like [area 28], a lot of people like [area 28], and [area 32] is another area that people seem to like. Some people love it but some people don’t like it.

I Looking at what kinds of disturbances and pressures are around, it’s easy to think of them as [inaudible] but I guess they could be opportunities as well. There are some things which are changing slowly like weather patterns or the way the soil’s changing, there are some sudden things, you mentioned foot and mouth, and extreme weather events. We have Brexit which is a big unknown at the moment, but there’s other things about the supply chain and price volatility, pressure from all the land uses. And then there’s social things, demographic pressure or limited basic infrastructure like broadband, all these kinds of things. Are there things that you see as either pressures that you need to be prepared for or things that you think that would give us an opportunity there?

R The folks that come to the house, they’re always looking for, they don’t ask how the washing machine works, what’s the password for the Wi-Fi. That’s very important to them when they come from mainland or from any other setting, and I think over the years it will evolve to something else. So we have to keep up to speed, we have to keep up to level of, Wi-Fi in five years’ time there might be some new system of some kind so I think it’s important [inaudible] activity to everybody to, the government has to put in to get this other infrastructure in place.

I Is that working quite well?

R It is but we’re not on the unlimited package here so they always run out, so we always have to keep topping it up. Usually we get an amount that will do a month, it’s through the satellite HebNet and if, for instance there’s a family of three boys, they were in the first two days and used the whole month’s worth, so we have to keep topping it up. But if you’re coming from an unlimited package to come here, it’s difficult. That’s a pressure on our business because it costs £30 a month and they used the £30 worth in two or three days, then the rest of the month we had to keep, we’re talking probably, you could maybe spend £300 in a month on Wi-Fi, so that’s a huge outlay.

I Do you ask them to pay for it?

R It’s advertised with Wi-Fi, but we just tell them to be responsible.

I How good’s the satellite?

R It’s ok, it’s reasonably fast, speedwise I couldn’t really tell you. The other thing is probably, for farming, Brexit and subsidies, cashflow is very difficult because going back, like in my dad’s time we had six or seven different schemes, there was the HLCA beef special premium, arable area aid payment, and they used to come throughout the year and used to help your cashflow. Now you get this payment and it’s usually in the autumn, and we usually sell all our animals in the autumn, so we get tens of thousands in the autumn but we’ve got no money the rest of the year. So it’s very hard, we should budget more but it’s not so easy when… Things have changed so much. The subsidies are very important, I think there’s about 2000 cows in the [area Ca] here, I think that would half if they went down. To go back to the silage, each cow will eat about 14 bales to take it through the winter, so I need to know how many bales I have.

I You’re clearly a numbers man.

R I usually remember. We need to know how many bales that we have. It’s amazing what they actually go through. If the cattle weren’t here all these areas would go rank so they are using the best of the area.

I If you have a bad year and don’t make a lot, can you buy it in?

R We can. This happened about five years ago, we had a very dry summer, and this machair habitat here we need rain in July because if we don’t then the corn won’t grow. That particular year we had 10 or 14 weeks without any rain, the corn didn’t grow, so I had to make the decision, do we buy in or do we sell the cows, I actually sold five cows because it didn’t make sense in buying-in. Even now, we used to have 50 cows, we’re down now to 40, so we’re still down a bit since then, so we haven’t built them up yet.

I That’s interesting because that’s another way in which you’re being resilient, is they’re a bit of a bank that you can sell when you need to.

R That’s right. You hate seeing them go but I was selective, we scan the cows, we know which ones are calving and which aren’t. Or you could give some of them another chance but…

I I’m interested that you haven’t built up your numbers again, is that quite hard to do?

R It takes time. It all depends on your stocking densities and your subsidies, if you’re still getting the same subsidy for having that number of cows rather than having ten more or whatever, it’s tricky to work things out, but I quite like having high numbers. I know I could cut my numbers more and still receive the same subsidy but I don’t want to do that, I like having the numbers. I think a good balance of this area for what we can hold.

I You said you were involved in the mart, is there a show element to that as well?

R No, the mart is different. There’s an agricultural society, [area 20] Agricultural Society, they do the showing and have a cattle show and home produce but the mart is just really for marketing. No, we have our AGM and don’t meet the rest of the year. We have a committee and that works reasonably well.

I Does the agricultural show influence people in how they do things?

R I think so. There’s quite a bit of a competitive nature to some, I don’t bother, you have to be into like showing animals but I don’t like showing things off really. Plus, I’ve got maybe too many animals and they’re not as good, other people have got less animals for the ground and they’re better quality animals so they obviously, I don’t think I would win anything. There is a competitive side to it, and that’s good, people like that. There’s more young people now with a bit more interest in that side of things. They also do various things for charity too, which is great, tractor rally and they do various things which is fantastic for the community, getting people together. There’s a lot of bachelor, older crofters that don’t see anybody so these things that helps them get involved.

I You mentioned young people coming into crofting.

R Yes, there are definitely, there are quite a few younger boys, and a few girls. I would say in the township, I don’t know that [inaudible] tell you that that’s quite a young township. From here up I think we’re all, I’m number one [township 1], this is [township 1] Farm so as I said I’m not in a township, I’m 46, my neighbour he’s got 2 and 3 [township 1] , he’s 48 I think, the next neighbour’s got 7 and 9 I think, he’s 51 and [inaudible] I think he’s early 30s, he’s got a croft, and then there’s another sublet that lad he’s 28 I think. So there’s only one chap that’s the oldest chap in the area, everybody else is 50 or younger.

I Any idea why that is?

R I think the parents have passed away and they’re handed on, but that’s happened ten years ago really. The other thing, land does hold people, for instance when I was in school in [area 22] there were 100 in the school, nine in my year, and I’m the only one out of the nine left on the island, all the rest are gone out of that nine. Saying that, seven of them were girls and the other lad from the village didn’t have a croft, but I was the only one that had a croft. All the rest are married on the mainland and all over. The school is now shut, there used to be five schools in [area 20] at that time, now there’s just the one. Going back to my father’s time there were 19 schools in [area 20]. But then the infrastructure, they just used to walk up the road to the local school because there were little villages everywhere, the roads are better and more people obviously. Going back to the 1700s there used to be 4000 in [area 20], 4000 population and there used to be a school down the road here.

I What’s the population now?

R It’s about 1500. But things have changed, families are smaller and there are couples in the island that don’t have any kids, so things have changed.

I You said it’s getting wetter, is it every year wetter or you’ve got more wet years?

R I couldn’t see the patterns but it’s definitely wetter I would say.

I Is that a problem?

R Yes, it’s not so good for the ground because we get a thing called compaction, it compacts all the ground and the roots and the grass can’t grow. Then it churns up more and more rushes and drainage, so it does have a bit of an effect to everything, it is an issue. It’s not so good for the animals as well, especially just now when the cows are calving you have to feed them more, if they’re not inside or have shelter to keep their body condition they’re burning off more of their own fat.

I Is there anything that strikes you?

R Forestry. I’m enrolled in a shooting group as well, we have the shooting area, the shooting lease here. Myself and four neighbours have the shooting rights, this top end of [area 20] is owned by the Scottish Government, and we rent off the government. It’s 15,000 acres and we’ve got the shooting rights for the wildfowling. I trained as a gamekeeper when I left school because my dad was still fit and keeping the place going, so now we take in shooting parties. We take in about six weeks a year in the autumn, so they stay in the holiday cottage, three groups stay there and [my wife] will do the food for them or they’ll do their own food, the others stay in a hotel. That usually starts from October through to January. We’ve had Belgians, French, English, Scottish.

I Is there a big demand for shooting?

R Yes, we’re fully booked every year, more or less repeat custom. A couple of guys come twice a year from the garage in Luton. Then these Belgians have come are just crazy, we have migrating woodcock and snipe so they come, and geese and duck, they just love it. Three of them fly from Belgium but two of them drive, they’ll come with dogs and it takes them about three days to get here, and they’re here for four days.

I So they’ll have a birding dog with them?

R Yes. This is also excellent for, it complements my business as well because it’s a quieter time of year, the ducks are out, the cows are pregnant and whatever, shorter days, so it works in well with that. We have to arrange beaters, we get two or three local guys and we pay them £60 a day to come beating, and it all helps everybody else at a quiet time of year.

I What happens to the birds, do they get eaten?

R Yes they eat them.

I Locally?

R They’re allowed a brace per gun per day, and then the rest we can sell them to them or we can sell them to a game dealer.

I So you have a game dealer here that will take them?

R Yes, or on the mainland, we get them taken away. That’s the wildfowling side of things, and recently what’s come up is the deer shooting. We have been successful this time as well, so we’ve got the deer shooting. We just got it last autumn, we’ve done the hind season, so we now have the stag season starting in the summer.

I Again, interest in it?

R Yes. We don’t have huge numbers but we will have to take down the numbers quite a bit.

I How do you advertise something like that, are there special game…

R There are websites. The other thing, it’s a season [inaudible] so it’s good for visiting people coming here, it helps the hotels and the shop. A lot of them, one of the guys that comes, he’s got his own company, he makes the inside of the [product name] and they eat out every night, they go to [inaudible] it’s a part of their, when they come they want to spend money here, it is fantastic. A lot of the time the press they get misrepresented but usually when we’re shooting woodcock the bits that we go to if you shoot a third of what you see that is acceptable or a good day. We’re only doing a certain area, we’re not doing everything, so we’re only shooting a third, and you can only cover so much ground in a day. There are [inaudible] thousands of them, woodcocks, and we’re only shooting a very small percentage.

I Snipe as well?

R Snipe as well, yes. Snipe aren’t as plentiful as they were in the 90s but there are still… That’s the same, we shoot probably less than a third of what you see in a day, we walk through the bogs or…

I That’s interesting because you’ve got all the work that you’re doing to preserve some of the wading birds and then managing the, using the others for shooting [inaudible]

R We have marauding deer coming in, I don’t know if you’re aware of the issues with Lyme disease and tick. In the last 20 years all these parks, we never used to have tick in them and we didn’t used to have to treat the lambs in the summer for tick but now we do because there’s tick everywhere. It’s the deer. My lad had Lyme disease when he was young, he got a tick behind his ear and we took it out and then he had a big bull’s eye on his cheek.

We have a late growing season so we keep feeding the cows until the first or second week in May and then we put the cows on to grass, and you have to zone off two or three fields for the grass to grow. Usually in the end of April these parks, there’s deer in them, and one particular night I went down and shot a couple, and one of them had at least 2-300 ticks on it. I dressed them out in the shed and then came to the door and took all my clothes off at the door, I had four on my arm. It’s quite worrying really.

That’s another change in this habitat and one of the reasons for that is, back to when we had the headage payment, when we had a HLCA £10 a sheep and £100 a cow, and a lot of people had 100 sheep because they were getting £10 but they were out on the hill and the hill was burnt, and it was grazed, and then they were taken in, dipped, etc, back out again, and they were managing that sort of habitat. Now, since that payment’s gone there’s no sheep on the hill and the habitat has changed on the hill, that’s why the deer now are coming in. That never used to happen in my dad’s time.

I Do you think there’s now not enough food for the deer on the hills?

R It’s not managed as well. The heather used to be kept short and when it did grow, when it was burnt or eaten it would come up nice and there would be grass in amongst it, but now it’s just all growing and there’s not any management really. That’s a change I’ve seen in my lifetime because we never used to have ticks in the garden or whatever.

I Do you have tourists asking about Lyme disease?

R They do, yes. We have a sign next door, and it’s quite an issue, you don’t want to scare people off but they have to be made aware of it.

I How do they react to that?

R They’re not best pleased really. Quite often with the Lyme disease I think it’s only 60-80% of the time you get the bullseye rash so there might be people leaving the islands here, it could happen anywhere, that have Lyme’s and they don’t know about it.

I You started talking about forestry, is there local competition for forestry?

R Not really. I’ve tried to do a couple of areas but I was knocked back because the ground wasn’t suitable, it was quite a sheltered area but they wanted more fertile areas.

I Is that the Forestry Commission?

R Because I love trees, they break up more habitats.

I Anything else on there? The last list is looking at mitigation options. These are other things where we’ve found some people are reducing stocking [inaudible] particularly for the south, and deciding they can’t do intensive so they’re going to go the opposite way. Looking at ways of being more efficient, looking at what technology can give, diversifications, sharing, you talked about your machinery, you don’t have a sheep stock ram? Thinking about shop market say selling your own materials.

R I’d like to do more renewable energy if I could.

I What sorts of things would you want to do?

R Anything that would harness the wind. The turbines I think there’s issues in the islands, in [area 20], regarding planning permission but I think it would be good to harness the wind because energy prices are rising all the time.

I What’s the barrier to doing that?

R It’s a huge outlay. I think maybe ten years ago the feeding tariffs and whatever, and the other thing I’d love to do is, if you did have a little turbine and charging point for your car that would be fantastic. Then you know it is all green, because some of the charging points you get you don’t know…

I Do you have an electric vehicle?

R No, but the doctor that works with [wife’s name] does. They are too expensive to buy.

I [inaudible]

R They are but I think in the future it is the way forward. With all the wind we have I would love to harness the wind more. Myself and one of my friends years ago during the Foot and Mouth, we tried to market our own lambs down to… Actually [person 19], we marketed our lambs, we had fat lambs and I was working the abattoir at the time and we were killing them and putting them straight down to London. It cost £30 a head to get each carcass there, we sent 200 lambs but cashflow was the issue too, we weren’t getting paid from the restaurants until six months after. The amount of work that went into it, you had to have volume.

I Did you find it easy to locate the restaurants who would buy?

R Yes, it was through a friend of a friend. They bought it, and there’s a good story about it from the Outer Hebrides. It was not cost-effective really, and we thought we weren’t going to get paid, it’s a big risk.

I Do you know why they didn’t pay you for six months?

R I think it seems to be the way these restaurants work. Saying that, Foot and Mouth, the next year the prices were better so it was easier for us to sell in the mart. It could be done but for the volume here you’d have to do so many more.

I Are you still involved with the abattoir?

R No. It’s a privately owned abattoir but I think the chap I don’t know if he is going to keep going because there’s overheads and he’s got to install CCTV and it’s a huge… It’s a big outlay for him and he’s the same, he doesn’t have the volume coming through.

I That’s probably more welfare-friendly than [inaudible] abattoirs would be so you probably don’t need the CCTV.

R That’s very true. Then your food miles, the animal would stay on the island or whatever, now they have to go away, which is sad.

I Did you have lairage with the abattoir?

R Yes. It was mostly for crofters that used to do the slaughtering in their shed, it’s mostly for them, and then they would be able to give it away to their friends. Because if you kill it in your shed you’re only allowed to eat it yourself, you’re not allowed to give it to anybody, but they would be gifting it. Some were actually selling it on, it was all stamped officially and the vet came in, and the meat hygiene service were there. It is a shame really.

I So that was really the abattoir was so that you could have a local trade?

R Yes. I was speaking to the chap the other day and he’s thinking of giving up his licence, which would be a big shame. But then it’s not cost-effective for him and at the end of the day it’s a business and if he doesn’t cover his costs… There’s been huge talk about getting an island brand, so it’s getting everybody’s doing different things, you’ve got somebody on the west side with Highland cows, you’ve got Aberdeen Angus cows, Continental cows. We can’t finish here either, the calves we sell, we calve just now, sell in October, these calves will then go away to the mainland and intensively fed for another year. We can’t do that really, it’s only if you have a cow that wasn’t in calf and was in good condition or you kept a couple that you could finish but you couldn’t afford to finish them all, because if you did you would have to import your cereal and your inputs, and that wouldn’t be cost-effective either.

I What [inaudible] the Highlands, do they manage to finish those here?

R I think they do.

I But presumably takes quite a lot longer?

R It does, they’re such a small growing beast. It’s so difficult to get an island brand or to do something.

I Is it because everybody’s doing something different so the island brand wouldn’t be a single thing?

R Finishing would be difficult.

I And you’re more cattle than sheep? [area C]’s got its mutton project that they’re trying to get going.

R It would be fantastic if it could work but would you have to… Realistically, the number of livestock we have on the islands is probably not enough, unless you went for niche markets somewhere. But then would you be allowed to finish them on the mainland for another six months and still call them island?

I Do you have good links with the other islands around?

R Not really, no. [area 23], we all know each other, crofters or whatever, at sales we see each other but other islands, no.

I So [area 28] and [area 27] is quite different?

R I would say, yes. We don’t see each other much. We’re mostly all the same, it’s all a similar area but the Gulf Stream, we don’t get much frost, snow, a little. Were you here last weekend? [area C] [inaudible] Did you have snow? It didn’t last here too long, it was white for a couple of hours.

I That’s what it was on [area C] as well. A couple of weeks ago it was frozen.

R [area C] is completely different to [area Ca] anyway because they winter away and they’re closer to their markets.

I They wouldn’t say that, it’s all comparative. You don’t winter away from here?

R No. We’re lucky, we have the machair, it doesn’t poach the ground. Like [area C], it’s quite fertile in areas so if it’s fertile it will poach and then they make a mess.

I Is there anything you wanted to say you haven’t had a chance to say, anything you think I should know about and understand?

R I don’t think so. Just the Brexit issue, they’re talking about tariffs and whatever, it is important so something so small there might make a huge difference here or vice versa I suppose. But the Scottish Government seem to be pushing and helping us, which is a great thing because the calf scheme, they start giving money per headage for calves born, so that’s a huge… I think it’s a great thing, especially in rural and far-flung areas, we get a wee top-up so it’s a great thing because that helps making the difference to buying feed or whatever. It makes us put more effort into calving as well because you have to have the calf alive on your holding for a month and you get roughly £150 per calf, and it has to be beef genetics. If you lose a calf that’s £150 you now lose, and if you have to buy a calf to replace the one to put on to the cow, that’s probably £200-250, so you’re £400 worse off when losing a calf, so that’s why we have so many sleepless nights.

No matter what you do you still have to accept losses, it does your head in sometimes, no matter how hard you try. For instance, the second one, I’ve got 25 calves alive but the second heifer to calf usually when the bag of waters, it’s about two hours if she hasn’t calved, it was coming upside down with one leg, so I got my neighbour and we put it in the shed. We had an awful job, I was at it for half an hour, I managed to turn it round and we got it out, it’s alive, which was amazing. We had to put the calving jack to get it out because it stuck, but anyway we got it up and she wouldn’t take the calf, she was rejecting it. If you stood with her she would stand but when you turned your back she’d whack it.

Five days I was at it, standing and giving it supplementary because I didn’t think it was getting enough. My mum loves the animals so I moved it up to the shed and left my mum looking at it standing. Usually when the calf had a suck it will walk away and then sit down, so I went to get the tractor and I heard this whack, she’d killed it. I had tears in my eyes, no matter what you do, all this effort and she was [inaudible] for three years, so three years’ work to get to that stage and then she still killed it. It just gets to you. That’s life, so you’ve just got to keep on, resilience.

I Resilience is coping with the losses as well as the…

R I know, because it’s your life, your livelihood. Everybody has the same problem, the same issues and I know my neighbour had a cow that calved last year and she was very poorly the back end after calving so he [inaudible] put the calf in the shed, got the cow and that was fine, went home to have his lunch, came back, she had sat on it and killed it. Sometimes when you do too much it’s… I think it’s been made aware now, mental sanity for farmers now, it’s a huge, there’s lots going on, the cashflow and worrying about the animals all the time. It is idyllic and everything else but there are issues.

I The fact that you’re able to talk about mental health issues, do people help each other when they realise somebody’s struggling?

R Not really, people just block it out. You don’t see people often enough to talk about it. There probably are folks with problems but I think this chap from New Zealand, he’s made a big difference. He had roadshows.

I This has been a big issue in New Zealand, I talked to some colleagues out there, they’re working quite hard.

R I had a financial adviser recently and he said do this and that. He said what are you doing and I said, just as we’ve said, discussed everything. He said you do realise if anything happened to you, everything would fall apart, and you don’t realise that until… What would happen? You’d have to sell all the animals, you’d have to sell all, you don’t think about that until somebody says it to you. It’s the same in every other farming environment, isn’t it? Who carries the can?

I How does that make you feel?

R I haven’t really thought about it. You just keep on going. As we were saying initially, everything is linked, you take one of these links out and things just fall away.

I Can you get insurance?

R Regarding the animals? Yes, you can.

I Or if something happened to you?

R I do have injury insurance, I do have all that, somebody would come in and [inaudible] month’s wage for a year or something.

I There’s a lot going on.

R There is. A lot of people think there’s not much income but our turnover here is about £150,000 a year, so obviously you have so much going out.

I It’s a lot of managing.

R Yes. So it’s in and out, but it’s good. You don’t want to be doom and gloom about everything because it is a good way of life.

I You’ve clearly done a lot of planning for the future.

R Going forward, the house, the second one we bought, if something does go wrong we can just sell it, or if somebody wants, there’s options and you’ve got to try…

I Thank you very much.

End of transcript