

Fair Isle folk understand importance of nature

Stewardship is key to communities thriving, says **Dr Richard Luxmoore**



BBC2 is about to screen an engrossing two-part documentary about Fair Isle. Crafted by BAFTA-winning director Louise Lockwood, the films follow residents over the course of a full year, showing the realities of life on the UK's most remote inhabited island. Cleverly, each person featured is introduced with a list of all the jobs they have to take on, with combinations such as firefighter, teacher, shopkeeper and crofter being typical. What emerges is a testament to the sheer hard work, adaptability and resilience you need to make a living in such a place.

What is true of humans is also true of Fair Isle's flora and fauna. As the documentary makes clear, the island's wildlife has been crucial to sustaining the community.

George Waterston, from whom the National Trust for Scotland obtained Fair Isle in 1954, founded the bird observatory there. It is the place to be if you want to see one of the most remarkable and diverse bird lists in northern Europe.

Given its position between Shetland and Orkney, Fair Isle is a convenient stop for many regular migrants as well as some extremely irregular vagrants that have gone off course from their usual routes, such as Pallas's grasshopper warbler, red-flanked bluetail and Siberian thrush.

Breeding birds that make it their home include Atlantic Puffin, Arctic Skua, Great Skua and Northern Fulmar, as well as the Fair Isle Wren.

Along with the birds come birdwatchers – enthusiasts who travel from all over the world to view the rarities. They bring much-needed income for the community, in turn sustaining traditional crofting lifestyles that have been eroded from many other parts of Scotland.

One of the Trust's objectives is to support the communities, help them grow in numbers. Subsidies for small-scale farming are minimal, leading us to step in and fill the gap in any way we can, such as by keeping rents low.

Supporting crofting is not the result of a rose-tinted view of the past, nor maintaining heritage for its own sake. Crofting is a good example of sustainable land-use, employing non-intensive techniques

that complement nature, soil and climate and, most importantly, maintain a thriving community on the island.

The people of Fair Isle have an innate understanding of the power of nature. As the documentary shows, whether born on the island or having come from elsewhere, residents quickly fall in with the cycle of seasons and weather.

Lately, there has been further evidence of this: on 26 October, Environment Secretary Roseanna Cunningham confirmed that a community-led Fair Isle Demonstration and Research Marine Protected Area will be established to enable development of new or improved forms of marine management to protect the environment on which seabirds and islanders alike depend.

This was the culmination of over 20 years of sustained effort by the people of Fair Isle. In 1995, they understood that internationally important seabird colonies, and the marine habitats that underpin them, had to be conserved in order to ensure economic benefits for the human community.

In stark contrast to their sustainable stewardship of the land, they could see that the increasing pace of commercial fishing was undermining the marine resource so vital to all. Frustrated that they could do so little to influence it, they called for a protected area.

Now their persistence has paid off and, with support from the local Shetland Fishermen's Federation, they are poised to transfer the lessons hard won from the management of the land to their all-important surrounding sea.

It is perhaps no coincidence that, three times a week, battling through some of the wildest waters in Europe and skippered by an islander, comes their ferry – The Good Shepherd.

All of us who live in Scotland and the UK are islanders too. The people of Fair Isle have a lot to teach us.

Dr Richard Luxmoore is the NTS Senior Nature Conservation Advisor.



Conserving moors



Shooting brings benefits to countryside communities and wildlife species in Scotland, says **Adam Smith**

Recently game shooting has been under scrutiny in two separate political arenas. In Westminster the Petitions Committee has taken evidence on the inquiry into driven grouse shooting and a debate has taken place in Parliament with the motion for a ban on driven grouse shooting defeated. Concurrently, at Holyrood, the Scottish Parliament's Petitions Committee has been taking evidence on a proposal to introduce a state-regulated licensing system for all "game bird hunting" in Scotland.

The game shooting sector has every opportunity through these processes to present its case and, whilst the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, a research and education charity, is impartial in its approach, our evidence and our view on these matters is rooted firmly in science and was widely referenced in the Westminster debate. In the last 45 years the Trust has had more than 130 scientific papers in peer-reviewed journals on issues relating to upland ecology. The Trust is therefore in a highly qualified position to express a view on game shooting, grouse moors and grouse moor management.

With regard to the petition in Scotland, pheasant and partridge shooting, conducted well, brings Scotland multiple benefits; more brown hares, more songbirds, pollen and nectar rich mixes for bees, margins for insects, butterflies and moths. To achieve harvestable numbers of wild game requires dedicated management, and no feathered game is more wild than our native red grouse.

Consequently, the Trust supports grouse moor management and driven grouse shooting for three primary

reasons: habit management undertaken on grouse moors preserves and enhances heather-dominated habitats; the package of management – habitat management with predator control – contributes to the conservation of a number of upland bird species, not just red grouse; and, it is a land use that delivers high conservation value but is funded primarily through private investment. Grouse moor management also unquestionably supports local communities economically, socially and culturally.

Red grouse rely on heather as their primary food source, and the UK has some 75 per cent of all the heather moorland globally. Grouse shooting is the only management system that explicitly maintains and enhances one of the rarest habitats in the world.

It is not just the grouse that benefit – many other birds species do better on moor managed for red grouse than on other moorland, including curlew, merlin and black-headed gull. Without moorland management these species would exist at much lesser densities and at far greater risk.

Moorland also delivers a wide range of other public goods and services – drinking water, carbon storage and recreation. Grouse shooting is also a part of the cultural life of remote rural areas, and moors generate significant economic activity, often where there is no alternative. When challenged, as they have been, those who advocate the end of driven grouse shooting have yet to produce an assessment of the potential environmental, economic, community or cultural impacts that such a ban would create.

On other issues such as muirburn (seasonal rotational burning of heather) and peatland recovery, the

Trust's science-based view is that, as well as the regeneration of healthy heather stock, muirburn brings additional important benefits, not least reducing the risk of wildfire.

According to the RSPB "significant investment in management and restoration of upland heath" is motivated by grouse shooting. There is no doubt that with a ban such private investment would be replaced, or would it? There is after all an obligation for statutory conservation targets for moorland and peatland to

be met and additional funding from Government or charitable sources would inevitably be required. What other options are there and what level of return would they offer? Forestry is one, but this not only fragments heather habitat, it impedes the hydrology of neighbouring blanket bog and harbours predators. Sheep farming would rapidly see heather moor convert to species-poor grassland. Of course, another alternative is abandonment but we know that cessation of management, grazing, burning and predator control will affect the breeding success of vulnerable ground nesting species, and

focus by working in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen. While Afghanistan is not considered a country in conflict, it has suffered dramatic environmental degradation from repeated conflicts over the last few decades. In addition, the skills to recognise and proactively manage the environment have been lost. In Afghanistan there is very little, often fragmented, information about plants, where they grow, what they are used for and the services they provide. Early initiatives must, therefore, focus on gathering enough data to make planning possible and also on involving young Afghans in this research so expertise is developed to ensure conservation and services are maintained. This can be demonstrated through recent training programmes for Afghan researchers

and community NGOs in Tajikistan which saw shared skills and experiences contribute to the benefit of both countries. On the island of Socotra, part of Yemen and seriously affected by ongoing conflict, detailed and comprehensive data is available on how people use plants in their daily lives. Coupled with information on species diversity and distribution, we can devise ways to establish Protected Areas that have real significance to local people and achieve fundamental conservation in a single system.

The time to formally integrate the requirements of local communities into protected area and biodiversity conservation planning has arrived, as this will ensure biodiversity is conserved as an integral part of people's lives. Engaging people in that process directly, and not simply telling

is far from a game



↑ Scotland's moors would be hurt by tougher strictures on game bird shooting, says the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust



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