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CONSERVING SCOTTISH MACHAIR
A' DÌON MACHRAICHEAN NA H-ALBA

PEOPLE AND THE MACHAIR

A short explanation about the machair on the Uists, the abundant wildlife it hosts and the vital part crofting plays in maintaining this unique working landscape



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THE MACHAIR LIFE+ PROJECT

The Conserving Scottish Machair LIFE+ is a four year project, based on the Uists, which ran from January 2010 to March 2014 and aimed to demonstrate that traditional crofting practices have a sustainable future. The ability of crofters to keep up these practices is increasingly under pressure. The project encouraged crofters to maintain their traditional practices which support the machair's rich wildlife, while still ensuring the growing of viable crops for stock. The success of the project has helped towards securing the immensely important conservation value of the world's unique machair habitat.

Machair LIFE+ is supported by the European Union LIFE+ scheme, and managed by The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES) and the Scottish Crofting Federation (SCF).



A FEW REFLECTIONS

“When we attended a few public meetings in the Uists in the winter of 2009, the weather outside was pretty stormy. On occasion the atmosphere inside was pretty stormy too. We were left in no doubt that the crofting population valued the machair and were deeply concerned about its future. It was also made clear to us that there were significant challenges that would need to be addressed if crofting was to survive and flourish on the machair.

We were told that goose damage was making cropping unviable, we heard that baler string and canvasses were in short supply. Crofters told us that it was difficult to access the SRDP & that young people were not being given enough encouragement to get involved in crofting. We were informed that whilst some contractor services were readily available, others were not.



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*We listened to these concerns and whilst there are inevitable constraints with any funding programme, I believe we made significant progress in either addressing them, or helping to show how they could be addressed in the future.” - **George Campbell, Director RSPB North Scotland***



SEAWEED LIFTING AND SPREADING

*“The project had real quality machinery. Putting seaweed ashore has helped my croft by taking some of the really hard work out of it when I did not have the time or equipment available.” - **South Uist Crofter***

*“Well I’ll tell you what spoiled the machairs I think really first of all it was the artificial fertilisers. You’d get a good crop one year but next year it was hopeless.” - **Alec MacPhee, Crofter, Nunton***

Machair LIFE+ has through various initiatives, attempted to support and encourage crofting to develop sustainably, using modern machinery. With the purchase of a ‘giant’ seaweed spreader and the support of local contractors, the project was able to assist 170 crofters with management agreements and work with townships all down the west coast of Uist to get seaweed off the shore and more than 400 hectares spread onto the machair, where it is used as fertiliser. Handing over the project machinery to a local contractor has ensured that for the next three years crofters will be able to have seaweed lifted and spread at a subsidised rate.



The project also commissioned the Scotland’s Rural College, (SRUC) to carry out tests to analyse the nutritive qualities of seaweed as an organic fertiliser so it could share this information with crofters and partners.

We also took a team of children from Balivanich Primary School to demonstrate how seaweed had historically been collected from the shore using ponies and panniers. Then we showed them how much more effective the project tractor and trailer were – although the process was just as smelly!

TRADITIONAL HARVESTING

“I remember the Liniclate machair, there used to be crowds down there with the scythes and doing the tying by hand and everyone was helping each other.” - Neil MacPhearson, Crofter, Liniclate

The project supported the use of traditional methods of harvesting which are of huge benefit to wildlife. Cutting crops later in the summer, reaper-binding corn and the making of stacks and feeding out seed are all vital activities for birds like the corncrake and corn bunting. Late cutting also helps wildflowers to set seed and invertebrates remain available for birds to feed upon.

Many crofters also believe making stacks is still the best way to dry and produce high quality seed. In South Uist where crofts are smaller, more scattered and often more difficult to access, combine harvesters are often less practical and given these units are producing feed and seed for limited numbers of cattle, traditional methods are often the most cost-effective way, involving little machinery or out-goings - albeit they are labour intensive.

The project gave out binder twine and funded the refurbishment of ten traditional reaper binders on the islands and 90% of these are now working in South Uist and Benbecula.



THE SEED LEGACY

"I remember an exceptional storm and spring tide in 1962 which shifted all the stooks and totchians at least 300 yards. Much of the seed was lost that year and it's still a worry today." - Neil MaCaskill, Crofter, Berneray

The project bought an industrial seed drier and converted it to become a mobile drier so it could travel island wide to help crofters. This not only dries seed more quickly than the traditional method of spreading it over a barn floor, it also means less seed is lost during the process of drying. Other project actions have also helped improve quality and quantity of precious local varieties of seed and access to it.

Three local varieties of corn grow on the Uists which are specifically adapted to the difficult growing conditions of the machair. They are small/black oat, rye and bere barley. We produced a seed register of local seed suppliers which is now available to crofters in local stores and other community outlets.



CROP PROTECTION FROM GRAYLAG GEESE

“Crofters have to change and adapt all the time to protect crop and grazing from geese, luckily we’ve got the scarers out there, doing a good job.” - John Buchanan, Crofter, Torlum

Machair LIFE+ took on crop protection and goose counting responsibilities for the duration of the project as greylag geese were causing increasing damage to crops and were becoming a huge threat to crofting. Such was the success of the scheme from the start, that crofters quickly engaged with the project and a level of trust began to build that we were really here to help. The aim was the protection and increase of the main arable crop areas (corn on Uist and Barra and grass crops on Tiree) through non-lethal scaring methods, and where used, better co-ordinated, lethal scaring.

The project gave out goose scaring equipment such as fencing, crop guards and kites to crofters as well as liaising with landowners and RSPB - employed scarers to ensure that little or no crop suffered damage.



We also funded scarecrow-making workshops, which were held across the islands over a period of two years, in schools and community halls. Over 1000 of these scarecrows were distributed around the islands by the scarers and used in crop protection.



Machair LIFE also co-ordinated the bi-annual goose count. The revised methodology for the August 2012 count onwards created more local confidence in the count. Forty volunteers in vehicles, covered the length and breadth of the Islands from Berneray to Barra. The new count took place on one day and allowed for a more flexible approach to weather, tides and height and state of the crop, ensuring we could pin point when geese were more concentrated on the machair.

The Project also sought to encourage the utilization of local goose meat in school lunches, working with students from Sgoil Lionacleit. The S4 Crofting year course had a go at processing the birds while the Hospitality students developed recipes. Goose curry was on the menu in the school canteen on 30th January 2014 and the 100 portions prepared were gone before the final sitting.



MONITORING BIODIVERSITY

“It (the project) was a win, win situation: it helped crofters and the biodiversity at the same time.” - North Uist Crofter

Four years of fieldwork to survey flora, invertebrates and birds on the Uist machairs began in 2010. Contracted surveyors and RSPB staff spent much of their spring and summers collecting information on the wildlife of machair habitats.

To encourage young people to get involved with crofting the ‘Machair Art’ project was set up with students from the local secondary school. It gave students the opportunity to combine art with learning about crofting on the machair over the yearly cycle. As part of a combination of field trips students came out with surveyors and recorded their experiences through drawing and photography. The work was exhibited at Taigh Chearsabagh Art Centre, Lochmaddy and such was the success of the project that we ran it for a second year.

“Persuading young people to go out into the machair, and to learn about the machair and to know why it’s so interesting and why crofting is so important, Machair Art has done a really good job of that... I think one of the key things that will come out of our legacy will be to create a crofting course for school leavers as well.” - Hazel Smith, project community and education officer

“What was brilliant about Machair Art was getting outside to really learn stuff and help crofters with their work and I’m thinking hard about what I want to do when I leave school now as I’d like to study wildlife and farming.” - Machair Art Student





THE PROJECT LEGACY

The project has been successful in reaching all its targets but what about the future?

- Funding to develop a crofting course for school leavers has been confirmed and UHI and RSPB are working together to ensure this will take place. There will be more Machair Art programmes running in primary schools and more wildlife working with school volunteers.
- RSPB and other agencies will be on hand to support crofters to access the next round of the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) which is the main grant aid package to crofters.
- Geese are now being managed by SNH and an Adaptive Management Trial is taking place to reduce numbers as well as protect crop. Hopefully there will be more burgers and goose curry lunches in local schools.
- Visitors to the islands will find more leaflets and advisory material available. Look out for our DVD, worksheets and self-guided walk leaflet for South Uist and join in the summer programme of RSPB guided walks.
- Monitoring of key biodiversity by RSPB, SNH and other agencies. Specialist research to survey the relationship between wildlife and management of machair plots at Balranald Reserve is being set up.
- The project machinery ploughs on and will be used to teach crofting in the local secondary school and on the new course. Seed will continued to be dried in the new mobile drier and seaweed collected and spread all over the Uists.

"I think the biggest change I have seen is the lack of people. I am very fortunate that my son was so fond of crofting and my grandson is just as passionate. We need young people and encourage them to stay here. I don't know how we can do it. But there has got to be money in it or else they don't stay." - **Ena MacDonald, Crofter, Kyles Paible**



WORKING TOGETHER

“We’ve tried our best to support the local community and visitors to these unique islands, successfully managing the crop protection schemes on both Tiree and Uist, setting up management agreements to work the land with crofters in a way which encourages wildlife, through monitoring how these practices affect biodiversity and always listening and learning from what crofters have to say... We’ve worked with all kinds of people and this is what has made the project so successful.” - Rebecca Cotton, Project Manager

“We had great help and support from SNH, The Comhairle, The Scottish Crofting Federation, the schools, the estates, SGRIPD and most of all the crofting community of Uist. We achieved a lot, but if there is a lesson, it is that managing a resource as valuable and fragile as the machair, involves a lot of people, needs a lot of support and must be subject to a long term approach.” George Campbell, Director RSPB North Scotland





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Conserving Scottish Machair LIFE+ Project Layman's Report - Booklet 3/3

To find out more please visit:

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