

Crofting Connections ~ Ceanglaichean Croitearachd

Learning about crofting past, present and future, and helping schools to deliver the Curriculum for Excellence

Crofting Connections is a programme of activities and events that will inspire over 1,000 young people aged 5-16 living in remote rural communities throughout the Highlands & Islands about crofting past, present and future. They will learn traditional skills from crofters, create their own climate-friendly food-growing projects, and help safeguard the history, culture and heritage associated with their crofting communities.

Why the project is needed

Crofting is Scotland's indigenous system of small-scale subsistence farming that has supported families in some of the remotest parts of the Highlands & Islands for centuries.

Crofting has many benefits. It keeps communities alive, enables people to live and work in isolated areas, and helps keep rural schools and other vital public services operating. Crofters traditionally use low intensity management techniques and limited amounts of chemical fertilisers, weed killers and insect sprays, which helps to encourage wildlife and create unique landscapes and habitats. Crofting also sustains a rich cultural heritage reflected in its legacy of language, music, song, dance, poetry, storytelling and literature.

However, crofting faces major challenges in the 21st century. The average age of crofters is high, and many crofting practices, traditions and memories of a bygone age are in danger of disappearing. If crofting is to survive, both as a sustainable and productive use of land and as a living culture, young people must be encouraged to take up crofting.

Crofting Connections is modelled on a highly successful pilot to celebrate crofting in Year of Highland Culture 2007. A report of the pilot by Health Promoting Schools (now part of Learning & Teaching Scotland) demonstrated that in learning from crofters, young people developed a sense of belonging to the land and the community, whilst older people enjoyed passing on their knowledge and skills.

Young people also grew enthusiastic about the food production skills, traditions and crafts associated with crofting, and became more confident individuals with increased knowledge and pride in their heritage. Many also expressed an intention to live and work in their communities when they completed their education. Crofting Connection's key outcomes for young people will be increased:

- Desire to live and work in their crofting communities.
- Ability to keep crofting alive in the 21st century for the benefit of rural communities and the environment.
- Development in the curriculum's four key capacities for education – successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.
- Understanding of the need for environmentally-friendly and healthy food based on low carbon principles.



Project activities

Young people and their crofting communities will participate in activities that are fun, hands-on and linked to the Curriculum for Excellence:

- **Learning traditional skills** from crofters on croft land to create lazy-beds / rigs, and grow and harvest heritage crops e.g. Shetland cabbage and Lewis black potato.
- **Running seed genebank trials** with help from agricultural scientists and horticulturists to study Scottish landraces and rare breeds e.g. oats and brassicas.
- **Studying crofting past and present** at sites of cultural interest e.g. recording vanishing settlements and landscapes with local historians and archaeologists.
- **Learning about the connections** between crofting and the natural heritage e.g. studying unique habitats such as machair with countryside rangers.
- **Learning traditional crofting crafts** from artisans and craftsmen e.g. traditional dairying, boat building, fiddle-making, spinning, knitting, dyeing and weaving.
- **Celebrating crofting culture** through working songs, storytelling, poetry, Gaelic, and local dialects with the help of history societies, heritage centres and folklorists.
- **Recording the memories** of older crofting generations e.g. collecting traditional recipes, and recording Gaelic and local dialect place-names.
- **Learning to cook** traditional crofting recipes and sharing them at harvest celebrations.
- **Showcasing project work** through the expressive arts e.g. film, drama and art, for presentation to other schools and communities.
- **Linking-up with rural schools** in Europe and Africa to share experiences, and increase awareness and learning of rural issues in the wider world.

Through these activities, young people will contribute to a wide range of **community championed initiatives** including cultural and natural heritage, local food and energy powerdown projects.

Crofting Connections will produce digitised heritage records including oral history recordings which will be made available to the public through museums and heritage centres. An interactive virtual visitor centre - www.croftingconnections.org - will be created to store heritage records and showcase the schools' work to the wider public. A "Little Book of Crofting" will be produced in English and Gaelic to tell the story of crofting. Copies of the book will be given to each pupil participating in the project, and made available to the public through heritage centres and museums.

How the project will be delivered

Crofting Connections will be rolled out over three years to 50 schools located in the crofting counties. A Project Officer will be employed to assist teachers and heritage professionals to devise a programme of activities tailored to suit each school and local community that are appropriate to their location, staffing, resources, local culture and pupils' needs. Each cluster of schools will have its own local group, with representatives from education, crofting, horticulture, heritage and community development associations, to help establish the project in the area and ensure long-term sustainability.

Partners and support

To date over 30 schools and communities have signed-up to participate in Crofting Connections. Crofting Connections is led by the Scottish Crofting Foundation and Soil Association Scotland with the support of Heritage Lottery Fund, Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Crofting Foundation, Crofters Commission, Argyll & Bute Council, Cairngorm National Park Authority, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Highland Council, Orkney Islands Council, Shetland Islands Council and LEADER programmes.