

YC springboard talk

Well done the SCF for making this gathering of Young Crofters happen – may it bear much fruit.

And thank you, from me, for the privilege of being able to address this gathering, which I have been a bit reluctant about because at present I am not crofting, or even living in the Gaidhealtachd. I was until last year but my partner and I left to work at a Centre for Agroecology at the University of Coventry. However, the work I am doing in Coventry is about crofting and in support of crofting and so I feel that my heart and brain are still in the Highlands and Islands, even if my body is elsewhere for a while.

So, for me, a personal vision for crofting will include us moving back to Skye and working the land with my father, or taking on the crofts ourselves. We might keep sheep, as my father does just now; or we might return to cattle, which my grandfather kept; or we might be cultivating trees – I've around a hundred native saplings in boxes on Skye at the moment, grown from seed, ready to go in the ground; or we might be growing more of our own vegetables.

Or maybe we will be doing a little of all these things. There is a sense in which crofting has always been changing, adapting to fit the needs of the times, in order to try to maintain the constant of keeping people on the land, keeping the land in good heart and producing good food.

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Although I am going to offer some thoughts as a springboard, it is really in the conversations that we will have here over the next couple of days that our vision for crofting will emerge, and that we will begin to share the knowledge for action that we will need to make that vision real.

My guess is that we will be talking about three kinds of knowledge:

- Technical or Practical knowledge – the 'how to' knowledge by which a croft and grazings can be well used

- Political knowledge – the knowledge of how to convince others to support our vision and our actions
- Cultural knowledge – knowing who we are and why we do what we do

We need to know our own story, to know what crofting is and who we are as part of crofting, and then be able to share that story with others.

When I want to learn about ancestral practices on the land it is to the old people, the elders that I turn. If I want to know about, say, 'souming', or 'open and closed townships' or about how and when to best put 'leac' – the right kind of seaweed – in the ground for the 'buntata', I'll ask them. I encourage you to go out and ask a lot of questions of older crofters in your area. It is a really good way to learn. Don't be afraid of seeming daft Part of the way of eldership is that they see that behind the question towards a willingness to learn and to understand – so they are patient with me. What I get from them is not just practical knowledge. I am also learning something about our deeper story – what makes crofting and crofting communities different and special – what makes us crofters.

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When we were here last October with the gathering of school children which helped us to formulate this event, I could feel that there was a story being created here; a desire to be part of crofting and to take crofting agriculture forward deep into the 21st century. And I also heard some mature and well expressed comments about the challenges we face. Hopeful but realistic.

And one of the comments that struck me most was in the small group I was part of when one of the pupils spoke about the need to remove the stigma that people attach to crofting.

According to the dictionaries, a stigma is a mark of disgrace that is associated with a particular circumstance or particular kind of person.

The words of my colleague in the group spoke to me because I know about this stigma. I felt it strongly when I was younger and

since then I have researched some of the ways in which powerful and influential people have, over many many years, tried to make crofting into a mark of disgrace.

In 2006 The Scotsman national newspaper published an article about crofting the day before the Scottish Parliament was to discuss changes in crofting law. The author was a man called John Blundell, the director of the Institute for Economic Affairs, an organisation which tries to influence global economic policies on things like transport and energy. Anyway John Blundell had some strong views about crofting and crofters. He concluded his article by saying that crofting should be swept away and claimed that crofters were expensive, hopeless and pointless.

He acknowledged that he didn't know much about crofting – and that was clear. Because he was ignorant, he tried to create stigma.

But that stigma is a delusion. There is no 'mark of disgrace' on crofting. Instead, I want to offer another vision of crofting, another story, a story in which crofters – especially those who maintain or return to the traditional ways, or who innovate in particular ways – are, in fact, doing heroic work; and in that story to be a crofter is a badge of honour.

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But to choose this kind of crofting is to stand against the tide. Agricultural policies favour more conventional approaches to farming. In that sense, our vision for 2020 is the easy part. The difficult part will be to make that vision real.

I'm very glad that the Shetland crofter Ronnie Eunson is coming to this event. I've been learning from the internet about his crofting on Shetland. Ronnie has chosen an unconventional agriculture. He is practicing what academics like me would call 'agroecology'.

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I think some of the old people in the islands would say about agroecology that it is 'facal mor, mar marmalade' – 'it is a big word, like marmalade'. But although it is a fancy word for something

simple, I think it is helpful word for the future of crofting and I will try to explain why I think that is.

I think it can help us to understand agroecology, by contrasting its principles with those of conventional non-agroecological farming. Conventional agriculture is very concerned with financial profits and tries to get the maximum return that it can from the ground each year: as the recent reform of European agricultural policy showed, conventional agriculture is concerned with 'productivity' – the more 'productive' you are; the more support you get; and I think it is fair to say that conventional approaches are more concerned with how much they produce than with how they produce it. So I want to speak a little about the ways in which agroecological and non-agroecological farming systems produce food.

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Just like animals, the land needs fed to keep in healthy and productive.

A 19th century German scientist Justus von Liebig argued that three elements – Nitrogen, Phosphorous and Potassium (NPK) – were essential for plant growth, and a focus of conventional agricultural research has been how best to obtain and apply these essential ingredients.

Traditionally, in the crofting areas, nourishment of the soil was done with whatever natural materials were to hand: animal manure, seaweed, even the thatch from the roofs of houses.

However, there are other sources for soil enrichment. Some of these other sources are discussed in little book, called 'Crofting Agriculture', which was written in the 1940s by a man called Frank Fraser Darling.

In the book Fraser Darling warned that phosphoric rock suitable for agricultural use is very limited in the world, and that wasting it could be very harmful in the long term.

He added that the soils of crofting areas were notably scarce in phosphates. However, he said that agriculture could obtain phosphates from other sources, in particular referring to a little

island in the Pacific called Nauru – it is about the size of the Isle of Eigg, maybe a little smaller, and it was abundant in phosphoric rock suitable for agriculture.

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As it happens, around a decade ago I did a little work with a woman who was, if I remember right, at one time the EU's representative on Nauru. I asked her about the island. She described it as being a bit like a polo mint. There was a strip of rich vegetation around the coastal fringe of the island, and a hole in the middle.

A report written about Nauru gives more details. This is what it says:

Nauru's insides were literally ripped out by extensive mining due to the fact that phosphate mining is notably destructive...[90 per cent of] Nauru today is...[a] dusty arid barren wasteland...these changes have served to greatly alter patterns of vegetation and endanger a number of indigenous plant species. The Nauruan diet was immediately affected by such drastic changes in vegetation. Under the impact of the phosphate industry, fish and coconut that were once staples of the Nauruan diet were largely replaced by salty and fatty canned foods. It is undeniably clear that alongside the forceful erosion of the land, the Nauruan way of life and intricate relationship with their surroundings was also eroded.

Today in place of their beautiful surroundings and food traditions, the people of Nauru instead have the highest levels of obesity and diabetes in the world.

A former vice president of the International Court of Justice, led a legal commission about Nauru in the 1980s. He concluded:

The world cannot be insensitive to Nauru's problems. Moreover, the issues lying behind these problems are global issues with which no member of the world community can remain unconcerned.

The social and ecological catastrophe happening on Nauru has been caused by the needs of conventional agriculture. This is because conventional agriculture wants to get more and more produce from the land without really concerning itself about how it achieves more and more growth.

During the 20th century Nauru was part of the British Empire, and after the first world war more than forty per cent of the phosphates mined in Nauru each year were granted to Britain.

So it is likely that the dust of Nauru is scattered over our hills and fields and that makes what is happening in Nauru part of our story too.

Therefore, those of us working for the future of agriculture in the Highlands and Islands must also keep in mind the story of Nauru; understand that we are all connected to everything else on the earth; and look for ways of tending to our lands that do not cost the earth.

To my mind, agroecology is a word that stands for these ways of tending to the land. It asks for a different kind of future for food. It stands for the kind of agriculture that Ronnie Eunson is striving for on Shetland, an agriculture that is aware of the consequences of conventional approaches, and as a result seeks to be embedded in its own surroundings and ecosystems.

Having read his blog on Uradale Farm, I think it is fair to say that in doing this new kind agriculture Ronnie is drawing on the kinds of traditional agriculture practiced throughout the crofting areas, in past generations.

He grows crops and tends to animals that are naturally suited to the ecosystems of which his farm is part (Shetland cattle rather than the big continental breeds); and he is trying to produce food by utilising (as much as he can) the resources available in his own locality – using local grain varieties, possibly seaweed as a fertiliser.

He is choosing to practice an unconventional agriculture that holds the prospect of a future for food production that is not marked by ecological and cultural devastation. And although I have focussed on Ronnie, in crofting terms he is not alone in this choice. Even in

terms of people who are planning to attend this event, I could mention:

- Ena MacDonald and her son Angus who grow native 'coirce beag' (small oats) on land fertilised by seaweed to feed their herd of organically certified crodh Gaidhealach – Highland cattle
- John Mackintosh, who helped to set up the pioneering local food project Lochaber Larder
- Bill Ritchie who is helping to restore the woodlands of Assynt.

And I could continue, but I hope you will find out more about these people over the next few days.

With regard to supporting the Gaelic language, the great poet Sorley Maclean once wrote that those who stood up for the language in the early 20th century were heroes who preferred what he called their 'dualchas' – their cultural inheritance – over gold.

Sufficient to say that in this room are people who are not only crofting elders proud of their 'dualchas', their cultural inheritance; but who are also, in my view, the pioneering practitioners of a humane and hopeful agriculture for our future, locally and globally – they are agro-ecological heroes.

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And if we take on the work that these elders have pioneered for us we may have more support in the future, because powerful global organisations like the United Nations and the World Health Organisation are starting to acknowledge that the conventional systems of agriculture are failing and that crofters, indigenous peoples and peasant farmers are right to be sceptical when faced with plans to modernise and industrialise their agriculture which usually – as in the Highland Clearances or the colonisation of Nauru – involves sweeping the majority of them off their lands.

In 2009 research that was sponsored by the United Nations and the World Health Organisation concluded that the industrialisation of agriculture...

...has achieved enormous yield gains as well as lower costs for large scale farming. But this success has come at a high environmental cost...Today's world is a place of uneven development, unsustainable use of natural resources, worsening impacts of climate change, and continued poverty and malnutrition...Agriculture is closely linked to these concerns, including the loss of biodiversity, global warming and water availability...

The report proposed a transformation of global agriculture. It concludes:

It is time to fundamentally rethink the role of agricultural knowledge, science and technology in achieving equitable development and sustainability. The focus must turn to the needs of small farms in diverse ecosystems and to areas with the greatest needs.

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That's us they are talking about.

And I believe it is in this way that we need to understand the SCF's call to create 10,000 new crofts. The future rise and spread of crofting needs to be part of a radical transformation of the way that we understand, carry out and support agriculture in this country – a new vision: making more land available for young people everywhere to use and to live from; supporting them to learn the skills they will need to make a sustainable life on the land; and helping to restore and strengthen the resilient, cohesive, caring communities that many of the elders in this room can tell us about.

I believe this is the kind of work that the coming generations of crofters are being called to do. This work is nothing less than the revisioning and reworking of crofting for an ecological age. As the United Nations has said: it is our time now, and we have much to do. So let's get to work, starting here.