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**THE REMAKING OF COMMUNITY: CROFTING, FORESTRY AND
THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CROFTER-FORESTER**

Alison P Brown¹

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which notions of community have been employed by various interests in relation to rural development. Here, the example used is that of forestry schemes by crofting tenants in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Within the overall aim, several questions are addressed; in particular, what does the notion of community mean and for whom, and how are various forms of state intervention such as legislation and financial incentives involved in this process of ‘reconstructing’ community. Themes which emerge from the study include the tension between individual and collective property rights and between the agricultural basis of the regulatory system and trends to diversification, and social change and diversity in the areas concerned.

¹ Formerly Research Fellow, Centre for Rural Economy

Introduction

Our understanding of society can be enhanced by investigating the role of legal relations among other social relations (Hunt 1993). Drawing on the findings of a larger study (Brown 1997), the principal issue explored below is how social relations and ideologies of ‘community’ are constructed by or reflected in the legal relations of land use in remote areas, with particular reference to crofter forestry. Further, it is necessary to investigate who or what is the ‘community’, according both to those who administer and regulate the crofting system, and to crofters themselves. This paper will first describe the social and legislative background to crofter forestry, then proceed to explore the assumptions of legislation and the wider regulatory framework, and the beliefs of crofters themselves, in relation to community, common property, the environment and social diversity.

Origins of the Crofter Forestry Act

Crofting is a unique form of tenure dating from the 1886 legislation which gave security of tenure to smallholders in the Highlands and Islands. Having undergone modifications over the decades, crofting tenure today grants tenants broad rights in relation to security, rent control, succession and assignation, purchase of the tenancy, and freedom to engage in non-agricultural activities. Crofts vary widely in size, from a couple of acres to large upland farms formed from amalgamation of smaller units. Generally, a share in the common grazing land of a village goes with the tenancy of the croft. Many crofts are used for raising sheep, but very few nowadays support cultivation. Crofters

almost invariably have other employment either locally or are living elsewhere; as a result many crofts are sublet or unused.

For decades, state policy has promoted large-scale forestry in the Highlands as a potential source of employment. It has been an assumption of such policies that forestry is under the control and management not of local people but of the state (Forestry Commission), landed estates or private companies. Tension between forestry and crofting agriculture was already apparent in the 1960s. While the Crofters Commission (part of the Civil Service, having various powers and duties in relation to transfer, division, amalgamation, purchase and other aspects of crofting) supported afforestation by others that would provide seasonal employment for crofters, the Crofters Unions were at that time expressing the concern that crofters' tenure status debarred them from undertaking forestry themselves. This is because in this respect crofting tenure follows agricultural holdings law; the general rule of which is that timber is the property of the landlord. While the distinctive breadth of crofting tenants' rights left the legal status of trees on croft land and planting by crofters unclear, until 1992 resumption by landlords of common grazings was the sole route to afforestation of crofting land on any significant scale.

It was not until the mid-1980s that the revitalised Scottish Crofters Union took up the issue of crofters' rights to engage in forestry. This was a time of great public concern about the way in which environmentally-damaging forestry was being encouraged by the taxation system in the Highlands and other upland areas. For the Crofters Union, enabling crofters themselves to plant was a key objective, alongside promoting

community ownership of existing plantations and increasing forestry-related employment generally. To bring 'crofter forestry' into being required legislative change to alter the balance of rights between landlord and crofter and to widen the basis of crofting tenure beyond agriculture.

After protracted negotiations with government bodies and landowners' representatives, the Scottish Crofters Union (SCU) achieved its goal of legislative change with the passing in 1991 of the Crofter Forestry Act (which came into force a year later). Its main provision was to amend the complex body of crofting legislation to allow grazings committees to plant the common grazings they manage and to receive planting grants.

Crofters' common grazings are a rare example in Britain of the management of common property. In this case, the common property is the tenancy of large areas of rough grazing. Management of common grazings is increasingly problematic due to the decline of collective activity, attributable to the ageing population in crofting areas, the expansion of off-croft employment, and a growing individualism as manifested in the taking of apportionments from the commons facilitated by the availability of fencing at relatively low cost. Most commons are used by only the minority of crofters in each village who keep significant numbers of sheep.

As a vehicle for combining economic benefits with enhancement of the environment, crofter forestry was given a great deal of publicity as a community endeavour, something to be engaged in by townships for collective benefit. Behind the Act and the subsequent publicity stood the

SCU, which was able to create considerable political capital from its achievement in securing additional rights for crofters in an unfavourable political climate. In several respects, the legislation was hailed as symbolically significant. It embodied the change in approach to crofting away from the agricultural model to greater diversity of activities. It was crofting law initiated by crofters, unlike previous legislative changes resulting from changing government priorities in relation to agricultural rationalisation or tenants' rights. It also righted what was seen as an unjust situation whereby public funds for planting went to landowners but not crofters. Furthermore, because it came at a time of increasing political interest in rural land issues, the Act became implicated in this wider debate. Landlords were given a right of veto over crofters' proposals in the Act, a concession the Crofters Union was prepared to make in order to secure the legislation. Its sponsoring MP called on crofters to turn any attempts by landlords to exploit the legislation to their own advantage in the wider campaign for land reform.

Crofter forestry emerged as a phenomenon into a receptive environment of debate and activity about native woodland planting and regeneration in Scotland and in the Highlands, involving community and environmental groups, voluntary organisations and state agencies and departments. Multi-purpose forestry was a key concept, and crofter forestry offered to be an example of this. Local control of woodland resources was one theme of this upsurge in interest, due to state plantations being privatised. At the same time, the priorities of the Forestry Authority, which gives grants for private planting, were changing. From the late 1980s, timber production was no longer the sole objective. In other words, grants would be given to plant on land

regardless of its productive capacity, and for amenity, wildlife and other non-productivist purposes. This ‘green’ shift in forestry policy was decisive in making crofter forestry possible, in that it provided the financial incentive for small-scale ‘uneconomic’ plantations. In turn, crofter forestry came to add to the environmentalist credentials of crofting, which the SCU were keen to demonstrate.

Crofting and the notion of community

Before discussing further croft forestry as a community activity, it is necessary to explore the notion of ‘community’. Although community exists through the creation of symbolic boundaries around a group of people, one must not assume cultural homogeneity within a community. When communities draw boundaries around themselves, enclosing and concealing internal cultural differences, ‘the boundary as the community’s public face is symbolically simple; but, as the object of internal discourse, it is symbolically complex’ (Cohen 1986: 13). Anything can be employed by the members as a boundary of the community, including the effects of state policies.

In relation to crofting, this flexible concept of community can be utilised in a number of different ways. In the political sense, the coming into being of an identifiable crofting community has been traced directly to the beginning of collective action and consciousness of a group identity on the part of crofters (Hunter 1976). In another sense, membership of this crofting community is related to ethnic and linguistic identity because, although one can buy into crofting, long-standing security of tenure and succession rights mean that the present ‘membership’ is

largely by descent. This is in turn related to the discourse of ‘incomers’ and ‘locals’, concepts which owe their obviousness partly to the experience of remoteness which accentuates the quality of ‘belonging to’ a community (Jedrej and Nuttall 1995). In addition, crofters themselves have their own definitions of ‘real’ or active crofters and crofting, linked to working the land, growing crops or at least keeping livestock. Crofting, as a specific legal form of tenure and mode and apparatus of regulation, also form a boundary, across which crofters as a community in turn negotiate over crofting policy. People may also experience a sense of community in more personalised social relationships which constrain how they use their crofts to avoid disharmony, or in cooperation in managing their common grazings or other facilities such as village halls. More personalised relationships, rural locations and a more ‘traditional’ way of life have long been associated with the notion of community. Just how the, or a, ‘crofting community’, is defined is therefore open to interpretation and debate.

Crofter forestry as common property

Crofter forestry is an activity which creates and reflects legal and other social relations with implications for notions of community. The legislation itself makes certain assumptions, one of which is that crofter forestry is a community activity. Rather than addressing the rights of all crofters on all land under crofting tenure, the legislation is aimed specifically at the use of common grazings by grazings committees. This can be explained by reference to the regulatory context at the time the legislation was proposed in the 1980s. Crofter forestry was promoted by the Crofters Commission and SCU as a collective township endeavour

carried out on grazings which remain in common management. According to both Crofters Commission and Crofters Union, the intention of the legislation was to facilitate local economic development through forestry and to diversify local economies away from dependence on sheep production. The assumption was that this required large areas of land, existing in crofting areas predominantly as common grazings. Economic benefits can thus be maximised by taking advantage of the economies of scale.

Woodland grant applications for land under crofting tenure made during the first few years after the Act consisted principally of applications by individuals in relation to their crofts, and included only a small number by grazings committees for planting on common grazings. This predominance of individual schemes can in turn be explained by the change in the regulatory culture of forestry policy in the late 1980s, that is marked by a significant shift towards promoting the type of small-scale projects in which most crofters are now engaged, by means of a combination of the structure of grant incentives, the grant approval procedures and forestry advisory services. This regulatory shift has enabled crofting households to become 'foresters' even on their small holdings.

This predominance of individualised initiative contrasts with the focus of crofter forestry as a policy and a legislative construction, which is to encourage township schemes under the management of grazings committees. Organisationally, for example, the Crofters Commission has no involvement with individual schemes, but has a pivotal role in

approving collective schemes, a role which extends beyond statutory duties to advice and negotiation.

An illustration of the ideological centrality of communal schemes is the way in which the term 'crofter forestry' is used by the organisations administering crofting, the Crofters Commission and the SCU to apply only to schemes which were enabled by the 1991 legislation, that is, schemes on common grazings. Thus the terminology of the law (The Crofter Forestry Act) is translated into the way activities are named and conceptualised in the sphere of crofting policy and practice. Individualised schemes, the same activity but carried out by households or individuals rather than committees, are not given equal legitimacy, neither by institutional involvement and support, nor by the language and concepts employed. Crofters, however, being on the whole unaware of the content of the Crofter Forestry Act, are as likely to view individual schemes as collective schemes as 'crofter forestry'.

In addition, many crofters would prefer to take a share of the commons for their own individual forestry schemes. Apportionment of common grazings for forestry is however considered undesirable by those who run the system because it would be likely to prove administratively unworkable. There are other considerations, however. Apportionment for afforestation would lead to the breakup of common grazings. To dismantle the institution of common grazings would undermine the communal pattern of work which is considered to be the mainstay of community life by those who operate the crofting system: the Crofters Commission, the SCU and the grazings committees. Common grazings

are thus the material manifestation of community, and their development by the community is therefore by definition community development.

Community has long been an central concept in rural development in the Highlands. As the Highlands and Islands Development Board put it, 'a collective or community approach to development can foster self-confidence and a spirit of independence within the community by demonstrating that progress can be made under local leadership and need not lean so heavily upon outside influence and help' (quoted in Hunter 1991: 171). Rural development programmes of recent years, such as the Township Development Scheme of which crofter forestry can form a major component, have emphasised community initiative rewarded by community benefits. It is likely that this increases the legitimacy of such programmes, in that money is not going straight into the pockets of individuals.

Does the community exist?

Among crofters, despite the official enthusiasm for community initiative, there exists a pessimism about communal management, and also more generally about the decline of collective activity and the demise of community spirit. This contrasts with the discourse of community participation and initiative in which crofter forestry as a policy and a political initiative was conceived and is promoted and administered. As one grazings clerk commented, the policies and promotion of crofter forestry are an attempt to recreate a lost sense of community: 'They are trying to revive a kind of past'.

When tracing these patterns of social change, it is nevertheless important to remain alert to geographical variation and to heterogeneity. There are noticeable differences between parts of the crofting counties in the use of common grazings, the state of crofting, and the concerns crofters may have when considering a township scheme. These differences reflect a variation in social and economic relations which contribute to how people experience community.

Most common grazings schemes in existence in the first three years were found on Lewis and proportionately more townships there were interested in the idea or are actively pursuing a scheme. Common grazings in Lewis have, in general, more shareholders and a higher proportion of shareholders still using the grazings. Most anticipated planting large areas of poor land, motivated by the financial gain and the practical benefits such as shelter, but there is also a real interest in trees and in improving the environment of villages. In most townships, agreement among shareholders and between crofters and landlords presented few obstacles, and crofting activity and the demographic balance in the community were felt to be in a healthy state. Despite concerns about the rights of non-active shareholders and absentees, the general agreement that proceeds from forestry should only be used for communal benefit, and the confidence that agreement can be found on how to use the money, indicated an apparent strength of 'community spirit' in the Western Isles.

Wester Ross provides a contrast to Lewis in many respects. When crofter forestry was being promoted, there was greater antipathy towards forestry in general, and native trees in particular, for a combination of

cultural and economic reasons. These include the association of forestry with landlordism and with the demise of upland sheep farming. Problems with landlords had been encountered and for this reason, as well as the historical legacy of landlordism, tenure relations were felt to be a potential obstacle to schemes. In general, the state of crofting and crofting communities was perceived to be unhealthy, with many inactive and absent crofters and little cooperative activity. Related to this, there was scepticism about the possibility of collective forestry schemes because of the potential for disagreement between participants. There was an impatience with the way in which cooperative activity was preferred over the efforts of individual households, individual projects being seen as more efficient and more secure because they do not depend on maintaining cooperation. Many crofters were reluctant to proceed on any basis other than by apportionment of the commons.

This does not lead to the conclusion that no sense of community exists. Where there is reluctance to engage in collective activities and to pool resources, there is still a sense of responsibility for preserving harmonious relations with neighbours. This is illustrated by the general attitude towards the procedure of minority schemes, permitted under the crofter forestry legislation. Where only a minority of shareholders are interested in pursuing a scheme, they may do so on the common grazings and the grazings committee are obliged to facilitate this. Despite the apparent attraction of this procedure for crofters keen on forestry but unable to muster the enthusiasm of their village, there was a general feeling that to pursue a minority scheme was undesirable in that it would cause ill-feeling in the community. Having the formal sanction of the Crofters Commission, who will have regard to the community's interests

before approving it, an apportionment becomes one's own land to do with largely as one pleases. But to interfere with others' use of part of the common grazings while it is still common was likely to provoke tension and therefore was to be avoided. Thus the community can be one in which in terms of land use each household operates independently, but voluntarily restricts their exercise of their legal rights out of a concern to maintain good relations with others. It is significant that at the same time as arranging rights so as to preserve common property against individualisation, the legislation gives priority to individual rights to use common land and receive planting grants. This encourages individual initiative on the part of the 'forward-thinking' crofter, without sacrificing the common property which ties a community together. Informal social norms, however, intervene to dissuade individuals from exercising their rights for the sake of community cohesion, to avoid 'divisions' or 'ill-feeling'.

From these considerations arise issues of the relative priority accorded to the rights of the individual, of the committee who are formally the representatives of the community, and of 'the community', in the sense of both the wider group of shareholders in the commons, and of residents of villages whether or not they hold shares in common pasture. This new activity prompts those involved to consider where they stand in relation to the various potential communities they may belong to, and to decide which communities to create, recreate, disrupt or abandon.

Furthermore, the nature of communities has implications for the extent of collective forestry activity. Communal schemes are more likely in some areas and not in others, because of the level of preparedness of

communities, in the form of groups of shareholders, to undertake such collective activity and responsibility. This is related to the 'health' of communities in terms of the proportions of present and absentee shareholders, 'active' and inactive crofters, younger and older crofters, and those who are agriculturally-oriented and those who are not. Another major factor in the likelihood of a communal scheme going ahead is the presence in communities of well-informed, well-connected crofters who have the 'cultural capital' to carry through the complex and lengthy procedures, and in particular to incorporate a forestry project into a wider community development initiative, often utilising sources of European funding.

This illustrates the interconnectedness of remote rural areas with national and international social and economic processes. This is not a recent situation: crofting originated in the transformation of the Highlands and Islands by capitalist projects in the nineteenth century. Subsequently, during this century, beliefs about forestry have been shaped by its central place in not only the landed estate system, but also the capitalist extraction of natural resources from the Highlands using local waged labour. The mainland has been affected more than the Western Isles, where forestry has never been significant. Communities in the Western Isles have less recent experience of the two factors which have caused social division on the mainland; first, the dominance of the sporting estate and its associated alien elite and class divisions. Estates retain much control over how land is used and therefore over employment in farming, fisheries and forestry, and over housing. Secondly, there is the more recent phenomenon of the housing crisis generated by a combination of the increase in holiday and retirement homes and the lack

of access to land for building. Such factors shape the collective response to other external changes.

An agricultural community

As a departure from the traditional agricultural basis of crofting, the advent of crofter forestry challenged existing social relations based around the primacy of agriculture. Although allowing minority schemes, the law gave the central role in managing schemes to grazings committees, using the model of how agricultural improvements to commons are managed. Grazings committees comprise those shareholders with the greatest interest in using the grazings for sheep farming. Unless it is designed clearly to improve rather than detract from the agricultural utility of the commons, the grazings committee is not likely to be enthusiastic about a woodland project proposed by shareholders who are less involved with the grazings.

The Commission has the power to grant an apportionment, that is, allocation of an area for the exclusive use of one shareholder, who in return will give up a proportion of their allowance for stock on the commons. The applicant must prove the value of the proposal for their agricultural activity. Another example of the persistent agricultural basis of the regulation of crofting is the Crofters Commission policy of preferring not to allow apportionment of commons for forestry purposes, while allowing apportionment for agricultural improvement. This is clearly out of step with pro-diversification policies. It also suggests a slight tension in the regulation of crofting; in that cooperation in agricultural activity is assumed to be central to the existence of crofting

communities, but at the same time the individual crofter's progress in agriculture is also to be encouraged.

Behind the no-apportionment policy lies the desire to preserve common property and to see proceeds from woodland used for community benefit. One consequence is that where few shareholders use the grazings for pasture, and there is therefore more land available for forestry, forestry schemes are less likely to go ahead because the shareholders have no recent precedent for collective activity and see little point in prioritising communal benefit when there is no functioning common property regime.

A notable feature of crofter forestry schemes is the potentially substantial levels of grant income to which shareholders are entitled but the absence of statutory procedures for management of such income. In advising committees, the Crofters Commission recommends that proceeds be used for management of the woodland and grazings rather than be distributed to shareholders. Grazings clerks anticipated the proceeds being used for township projects. Although there were some ideas for non-agricultural projects such as recreation areas, improvements which would benefit livestock management, particularly fencing, were foremost in the thinking of most grazings committees. Thus despite the intention behind it, subsidy for farm woodland is not being used by crofters to diversify away from agricultural production but to sustain it.

Once money starts to flow into communities from forestry, how it is used and distributed raises issues of the powers and responsibilities of shareholders. If proceeds are to be used for township development, who

decides what this means? If a small minority are engaged in agriculture, should agricultural developments be encouraged, or other facilities which by definition will benefit not only all shareholders but other township residents? These are questions which will have to be negotiated by crofters as they adjust to the recent shift in orientation of the regulatory framework, which introduces elements of diversification while retaining a fundamental agricultural basis. Besides many of their peers with livestock businesses, many crofters with shares in the grazings but with no interest in sheep, and who therefore previously had little interest in the common grazings are now taking an interest in potential forestry schemes. Concerns arise over how such 'sleeping' shareholders might now decide to exercise their power to influence how the proceeds of woodland schemes are distributed within a community, and specifically how much should be reinvested in the sheep economy.

Relations between crofters in the new context are not addressed by the legal framework for crofter forestry. It prioritises landlord-tenant relations, giving them some definition through the provisions relating to consent. Although model agreements were prepared for landlord-tenant relations, as yet there are none for relations between tenants in terms of how contributions and proceeds and management are to be allocated. By default, relations between crofters are left to the framework of grazings committees and associated regulations, designed for the agricultural model of crofting. This again suggests that the regulatory framework is influenced by an ideology of 'community' based on the naturalness of cooperation between crofters as agriculturalists.

Another point to note is the perception of forestry as a threat to community. Particularly on the Highland mainland, crofter forestry is associated with the commercial monoculture afforestation of the past few decades. Afforestation has taken place in areas where the way of life based on hill sheep farming has declined. Regardless of the actual processes of cause and effect, the association is strong enough to induce a strong resistance to more trees, despite crofter forestry being promoted as being, unlike its predecessor, compatible with sheep farming.

In short, the regulation of crofting, as it relates to crofter forestry, makes assumptions about the existence and nature of 'community', the social relations and material basis of crofting communities. It perpetuates the assumption of the agricultural basis of crofting property and crofting communities, while ostensibly facilitating diversification away from agriculture. Procedures for managing crofter forestry are based around an agricultural or pastoral model of crofting. As a non-agricultural activity, forestry creates tensions in this regulatory scheme, between the state regulatory bodies and crofters, between landlords and tenants, and between crofters themselves. Intra-community relations have to adapt. Further tensions arise when community-oriented regulation meets with the decline of collective activity and community life; it appears that the phenomenon of crofter forestry has been used as an attempt to revive a lost golden age of co-operation.

Legal communities

Another aspect of the construction of community is the effect of legal relations and ideologies. Crofting law invites particular attention as a legislative framework which has a unique geographical and regional scope, which has in effect created a geographical entity, the 'crofting counties'. By defining crofting areas, the legal regime has transformed residents of that area into a 'crofting community' or 'communities'. It also causes this transformation by creating a class of people who share a unique tenure status, and following from that, a special relationship with the state. Crofters, in turn, reinforce their community boundary when responding to changes in the aims or means of regulation.

Another feature of the legal regime is the establishment of local normative orders, grazings regulations, which bind self-regulating communities of shareholders. Although designed to be enforced by crofters against one another, this element in the wider regulatory framework nevertheless has the external powers of the state (Crofters Commission and Land Court) behind it to provide legitimacy and credibility.

In terms of legal 'personality', there is no such thing as the crofting community, there are only individual registered crofters and grazings committees. In certain situations, however, crofting law demands that the Crofters Commission take into account the interest of the local 'crofting community' (this is undefined), notably when deciding on applications for decrofting, that is, the release of untenanted land from crofting controls. Thus the regulatory-legal regime, activated through the Crofters

Commission and the Land Court, suggests the existence of a plurality of crofting communities, each of which is a combination of crofting tenure and a locality, a legal-geographical construction. By focusing on the interests of crofters, and overlooking the interests of the many residents of 'crofting communities' who do not have the legal status of crofter, and by conflating people, place and tenure status, the framework of regulation appears to act contrary to a coherent approach to rural development.

Diversity in communities

Besides individual schemes outnumbering collective ones, the change in the regulatory culture of forestry has led to other respects in which the results of the legislation have not been as intended. Few crofters intend or expect their schemes to make money. Almost without exception, schemes have not been typical 'commercial' plantations, but multi-purpose initiatives mainly of native broad-leaved species intended for shelter, environmental enhancement, amenity, nature conservation and in some cases, wood products. Forestry has appealed to the non-farming crofter, or to farming crofters as a way of enhancing agriculture rather than an alternative to it. Although forestry and farming are often seen as incompatible, a substantial proportion of sheep-farming crofters are planting. They are incorporating forestry into farming, planting in a way which enhances their agriculture, either directly by providing shelter for stock or fencing off dangerous gullies, or indirectly by providing cash which can be used to improve other ground or renew fixed equipment. On the opposite side of the fence are the crofters who choose not to keep sheep, even hate them, who feel themselves to be in the minority, and

who cannot imagine that the sheep people will be interested in trees. By becoming involved in woodland crofters who have never lost their legal status as such can 'become' crofters again, in that they can find a use for their land in keeping with their environmentalist outlook, their dislike for keeping livestock, or that complements their horticultural aspirations.

In addition, because trees do not require the same degree of attention as livestock or the same intensive seasonal work as crops, woodland is an option that allows people who have crofts but who have other jobs or who are elderly to work their crofts and thereby remain within the community of active crofters. They can also make use of their crofts rather than 'abandon' them while working away, and thereby secure their continuing tenure. These observations suggest the existence of a plurality of cultures within crofting 'communities'.

Another element in the relationship between crofter forestry and community is the perception of forestry in the context of social class relations. Forestry is generally regarded as the traditional preserve of the landowning class. Some crofters for example can recount the experiences of their parents' generation, of being punished by estates for cutting firewood from scrub trees. Crofter forestry has, therefore, to be promoted as something for the people, for the community, rather than for the minority elite, and the plantations themselves as symbolic of unity rather than social division.

Multiplicity of identities or roles extends beyond the individuals to suggest the diversity of what can be termed communities, networks or cultures which, although geographically dispersed or unattached, meet in

the context of crofter forestry. These include the crofting leadership as institutionalised in the Union, which promotes both agriculture and forestry, economic development and environmentalism; various more or less loose formations of foresters, conservationists and other ecologically-minded people; and small businesses, farmers, local politicians. This diversity manifests itself at the level of institutions, but also in the differences between crofters simply as crofters. Differences of opinion over how land should be used, and what crofting is or should consist of are two obvious ways in which people differentiate themselves from other crofters, who may or may not be in their eyes 'real' crofters. For most, crofting as an activity, as it was and should be, is cultivation of the land, the growing of corn and vegetables for local consumption which is rarely practised today. Keeping sheep may or may not be regarded as real crofting, regardless of how widespread it is. Growing trees for some is a productive use of the land, and for others is the opposite, something suitable only for land which is no good for anything else. Each individual may discover through forestry that they become part of several different communities. A good example of the diverse senses of community or culture was the returnee whose plan to plant his entire croft had given him a new sense of belonging: to the disparate community of the reforestation movement, part of a broader environmentalist, artistic and political counter-culture; and also to the local community, to which tree planting, like organising the village music group, was a positive contribution.

Mention must also be made of the involvement in woodland projects of 'communities' in a more specific sense; these include the community trusts which have bought their land. In addition, there are groups of

people who have reinhabited previously abandoned crofting townships, living in restored or new buildings, running small businesses, producing as much as possible of their own energy and food, and undertaking woodland management in order to improve the environment and create local employment. This illustrates the link between crofter forestry and wider land reform and rural environmental and repopulation initiatives. Although the existence of one 'crofting community' may be largely rhetorical, communities can be formed in the sense of groups of people linked by legal arrangements over property and by a common purpose related to that property.

One specific point of divergence is the social origin of crofters and the dynamic between the categories of incomer and local. This is a significant aspect of social relations of 'community', and also reflects and is reflected in attitudes and practices towards land use and the environment. Bearing in mind the prevailing 'traditional' sheep economy and antipathy to forestry, and the presence in crofting areas of incoming migrants living 'alternative' lifestyles, it is a fair assumption that it is incomers who are responsible for most forestry activity, an assumption worth testing for what can be discovered about the nature of the crofting 'community'. Although it has been argued that incomers and locals are metaphorical concepts which owe their force to their symbolic value rather than 'the empirical attributes of such entities in some objective reality' (Jedrej and Nuttall 1995), it is possible to distinguish incomers as people who were not brought up in the locality nor inherited the croft from their family.

Incomers in this sense form a minority, though a significant one, of crofters engaging in woodland schemes. Their legal status as crofters stands regardless of their national or social background, despite the common association of crofters with an ethnic identity. Incomers are very aware of their position as ‘white settlers’, and crofter forestry is a matter which evokes this awareness; this is particularly so in the Western Isles, where there are relatively fewer incomers than on the mainland. Being English is not a necessary attribute of incomers, but a middle class or professional background almost certainly is, due to the finance necessary to buy the assignation of a croft. Both incomers themselves and locals see incomers as innovators, a characteristic reflected in their engaging in woodland schemes. Incomers are not subject to the same informal social control which inhibits local people. Another factor is the different culture of land use and landscape incomers bring with them, especially marked on the islands.

Even if they are not simply ‘metaphorical’, the categories of incomer and local are nevertheless not entirely clear-cut, nor are they associated in a simple way with attitudes to crofting, trees and the use of land. There are young crofters on their family crofts who have a strong dislike of sheep and are delighted at being able to use their crofts to make a practical contribution to improving the environment. There are also incomers dedicated to making their crofts as agriculturally productive as possible, and who introduce trees to improve the soil and provide their stock with shelter. A significant number of crofters involved in woodland are ‘returnees’, people who have returned to the family croft after years of working away from the area. Many either see no material incentive to establish a sheep business or stand against the prevailing sheep ethos;

woodland is for these people a good way to use their croft rather than neglect it. Along with incomers, returnees may feel alienated from existing structures which govern the use of common grazings in the interests of sheep farming.

Concluding remarks

The crofting ‘community’ is a complex concept. It is not a concept defined in law but it is utilised in legal discourse and procedures, with a primarily geographical definition. It is also a political notion linked to action and consciousness and to state policy. It is a concept also linked to changing notions of what crofting is or should be, and to migration and the changing social composition of the Highlands and Islands.

Although many individuals and households are engaged in woodland schemes, the official definition of crofter forestry is a collective activity involving those holding shares in common grazings. Regulation of forestry proposals for common grazings requires means of allocating and balancing the rights of individuals, committees and collectives, whether these are ‘active’ or non-active graziers. There is no simple prioritisation of individual or collective rights in this context: individuals are given extensive rights to use commons but common property is protected from division and individualisation. Furthermore, individuals or groups may not exercise their legal rights due to social pressures. More generally, the example of common grazings suggests that the concept of common property is a complex one. Only the grazing rights are a common property resource, and the case of crofter forestry demonstrates the potentially decisive right of the landlord to govern use of the ‘commons’.

It may be that common grazings cannot be regarded as common property at all for this reason.

In relation to forestry, the legal-regulatory framework does not address central aspects of relations within communities, such as the relationship between forestry, agricultural improvement and community development. This is because it retains the agricultural model of regulation rather than providing a new framework by which agricultural and other interests could be balanced. Besides the construction of social relations within communities, a discussion of crofter forestry illustrates how the variable nature of communities can be reflected in the effects of legislation and regulation. In particular, the geographical pattern of crofter forestry reflects the 'health' of communities in terms of age structure, employment patterns, and social class. Social factors are, however, not all-determining; physical and environmental factors are also crucial to the patterns of activity. But physical constraints operate in a social context; such as what type of forestry and what level of 'productivity' is desirable. Some relevant factors, such as the isolation of communities, are a combination of social and physical aspects. In addition, the levels of interest and engagement in woodland schemes reflect differing attitudes to the possibilities for collective activity and community projects; geographical variation is apparent in this respect too.

There exist a diversity of cultures or communities within 'crofting communities'. Attitudes to land use, to agriculture and the environment, are indicative of this diversity. Forestry can be seen as a threat to communities, or associated with a separate, landowning, class.

Woodland projects can also be linked to territorial claims, whether by one community against its neighbours, tenants against their landlord, or by individuals and households new to the area. Crofters' activities and motivations regarding woodland are linked to more general beliefs about how land should be used and how the environment should be enhanced or protected, and projects can be seen as assertions of such beliefs. Different cultures or communities, with associated institutional structures in turn reflect the range of practices and beliefs.

As in other parts of the world, trees have become 'icon and currency in the domain of sustainable development', and metaphors for the projects of environmentalists, capitalists and popular movements (Rocheleau and Ross 1995). By focusing on crofter forestry it is possible to understand more about the struggle between these interests. It can be seen that remote rural areas are diverse in their general pattern of social and economic relationships. Moreover, state policies and the dynamics of a modern capitalist economy are decisive in shaping this diversity. It is important, therefore, not to assume any necessary association between 'community' and minimal state intervention (Ennew 1980), but instead to point out the different forms such intervention can take in remote areas.

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