

Case Study: Common Grazings at work—agri-environment



Ollaberry Collafirth and Crooksetter Common Grazings

This carefully managed Common grazings has taken advantage of environmental schemes and CAGS, and along with willing shareholders, has benefitted the workings of the grazings, the landscape and the local community.

Environmental Schemes

Over 80% of this common grazing is designated in several ways as SSSI, SPA, SAC and as a Ramsar Site.

These designations are due to the montane habitats and blanket bog, which support a range of breeding birds, in particular red-throated divers, great skuas, merlins and invertebrates, most notably Arctic water fleas. Relict tree-scrub vegetation survives on some of the inaccessible loch islands and on ledges and crags.

The first opportunity to join an environmental scheme came in the mid-1980s with the Shetland ESA. Thankfully, there was a strong consensus among the shareholders and particularly among the active shareholders. Jane Brown, the grazing clerk, has been in post since 2005 and strongly feels that significantly more than a simple majority of shareholders is required to back entry into environmental schemes if they are to be implemented successfully.

Ollaberry took part in the Shetland ESA for 15 years. The Tier 1 payments paid per hectare of land allowed some payments to be made to every shareholder—after developments had been funded. The main development undertaken through the ESA was to fence the southern boundaries with other common grazings.

To make these boundaries stockproof also involved the installation of two cattle grids on

public roads which cost around £13,000 each at the time. The cost of the grids was assisted under CAGS.

Maintenance of fences, handling pens etc. was also funded out of ESA Tier 1 money before the balance was paid out to shareholders. The shareholders agreed in advance to this approach which avoided the need for the grazing to invoice shareholders for their share in the investment.

One of the major changes that happened as a result of ESA was a significant reduction in the number of sheep being grazed on the hills. 500 ewes were also removed from Ronas Hill under a management agreement with SNH that lasted for 20 years.

The habitats improved dramatically over the 15 years of ESA. This was particularly evident in a 7 hectare park that had been heavily grazed but once fenced with no stock, the heather recovered. The grazing has improved significantly because of the stock reduction



and all the features designated on Ronas Hill SSSI are considered to be in favourable condition or unfavourable but improving condition.

Of the 1654 adult sheep being grazed on Ronas Hill 924 ewes are now removed under AECS stock disposal leaving up to 730 adult sheep grazing the hill. The other areas continue to be grazed with up to 787 adult sheep.

The stock disposal payments are paid out to the active shareholders who agreed to remove sheep from the hill from their own souming.

What are the CG's future for environmental plans?

A proposal to take part in a pilot project to look at the possibilities for the future of the Common Grazings is to be discussed by the committee. The re-wilding a large proportion of the hill with little or no grazing while continuing to graze the remainder for biodiversity is being considered. The Scottish Government is part of a dialogue on this.

The northern boundary of the CG is unfenced, as SNH would prefer it left as it is. The Ronas Hill - North Roe and Tingon Special Protection Area has been designated because of the populations of Great Skua and Red Throated Divers and the area designated includes almost all of Ronas Hill as well as significant proportions of North Roe and Lochend Common grazings and well as Tingon to the south of Ronas Voe.

The issue of whether to fence the north boundary is likely to come up again if re-wilding is to take place. It will be necessary to prevent stray sheep from neighbouring common grazings from being drawn in. The grazing committee do not feel that such a project could be executed without that element.

Photo of Red throated diver courtesy of Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Something that the committee have been aware of for some time is the possibility that a viable form of virtual fencing might become a real possibility. There are current systems for cattle and goats, but they come with very significant costs. The fleece on sheep appears to present a problem that has yet to be overcome but if a system does ever become workable for sheep then it will offer lots of possibilities. Different parts of the hill could be protected from grazing sheep at certain times of year such as margins around nesting or potential nesting sites for Merlins and around the lochans used by Red Throated Divers.



For further information about Common Grazings including information on administration, insurance, muirburn and sheep stock clubs, head to www.fas.scot or contact us on 0300 323 0161.