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To cite this article: Katrina Myrvang Brown (2006) New challenges for old commons: The role of historical common land in contemporary rural spaces, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 122:2, 109-129

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00369220600917412>



Published online: 28 Feb 2008.



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New Challenges for Old Commons: The Role of Historical Common Land in Contemporary Rural Spaces

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ABSTRACT *In Scotland, as elsewhere in Western Europe, many examples of historical common land have endured to the present day, but are under major pressure from the economic restructuring, socio-cultural recomposition and changing policy context that characterise contemporary rural change. For the crofting common grazings of Scotland, two particular challenges have arisen in the form of: (1) the growing difficulty of gaining sufficient livelihood contributions from traditional agriculturally-based activities; and (2) the increasing heterogeneity of rights-holders. This paper elaborates the findings of a recent survey, which sought to identify the main implications of these challenges for common grazings use and governance. An overall decline in levels of use of common grazings was identified, as well as decreasing involvement and investment in associated local institutions. This informs a discussion of the factors shaping the role of historical common land in contemporary rural spaces, an area neglected in the common property literature.*

KEY WORDS: Common property, Highlands and Islands of Scotland, crofting, common grazings, rural change

Introduction

Common property regimes were once widespread throughout much of Western Europe but the prevailing trend has been towards their demise. The interrelated pressures of population growth, commercialisation, industrialisation, successive rounds of enclosure legislation, and an intellectual and cultural privileging of individual forms of property, have all contributed to the extinguishment and undermining of communal resource rights (North & Thomas, 1973; Dahlman, 1980; De Moor *et al.*, 2002).

Nevertheless, a number of these historical commons have survived to the present day, covering approximately 9% of the land area of Western Europe (Brown, 2005). In Scotland, crofting common grazings are the most prevalent form of historically enduring commons, covering approximately 7% of its terrestrial area (Crofters Commission, 1999), thus constituting a significant part of the country's rural resource. They form a key component of the crofting system; a part-time agricultural

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system in which the tenure of a small individual plot of land known as a 'croft' or 'inbye' usually includes use and management rights over the common grazings. Born of a long history of struggles over land, which can be traced through the Highland Clearances and the subsequent evolution of crofting as a formalised system (Hunter, 1976; Devine, 1988, 1994), such crofting land rights hold great symbolic significance for crofters as both as emblematic of the wider historical commons of the clan system, and as a more general common inheritance and connection to land (sometimes articulated with reference to the notion of *duthchas*) that has persisted to the present day (Withers, 1988; MacDonald, 1997; Mackenzie, 2004).

Like many parts of rural Europe, however, crofting areas are being transformed by economic restructuring, socio-cultural recomposition and a changing policy context. The emphasis is shifting away from the dominance of production-oriented agriculture and forestry towards a growing valorisation of more consumptive and multifunctional aspects (Marsden *et al.*, 1993; Wilson, 2001; Mather, 2004). Common grazings, like most vestigial commons, tend to be found in areas that are economically, agriculturally and geographically marginal—albeit with a degree of regional variation—bringing extra challenges for rural development.

Given their spatial extent and marginal situation, it is important to establish the role (actual and potential) of these surviving commons in contemporary rural circumstances. The common property literature is thin on the particular challenges faced by first-world vestigial commons, and until now there has been little or no comprehensive information about how common grazings are used and managed in a contemporary context. Thus far, all the UK-related analysis of common property regimes has focused on commons in England and Wales (Wilson, 1997; Short & Winter, 1999; Short, 2000; Edwards & Steins, 1998).

A further imperative for understanding commons is the recent resurgence of interest in collective forms of land management and ownership in policy and practice, in Scotland and beyond (Bryden & Geisler, *in press*; Brown, *forthcoming*). For example, the *Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003* has provided new mechanisms for facilitating community ownership, reflecting a renewed commitment to community resource management in many parts of the world. Such valorisation of the commons stems partly from acknowledgement of the cross-boundary or common-pool nature of many environmental problems, and partly from offering a vehicle for securing local resources and encouraging 'bottom-up' economic development (Ostrom, 1990; Mackean, 1992; Agrawal & Gibson, 1999).

To understand better the role of enduring commons in contemporary rural spaces, this paper aims to identify the current patterns of use and governance of crofting common grazings, explain how they relate to contemporary rural dynamics, and consider their circumstances in the light of general collective land management revalorisation.

Common Land in Western Europe: From Ubiquity to Obscurity?

Historical Marginalisation and Survival of the Commons

In the majority of pre-modern, Western European societies, communal arrangements regarding rights to land were the norm rather than the exception, and formed a central element of agriculture for many centuries (Dahlman, 1980;

De Moor *et al.*, 2002). Over time, more individualised property relations have displaced such common property regimes,¹ albeit with significant spatial and temporal variation (North & Thomas, 1973). Most communal land tenure in the UK was supplanted between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries contemporaneous with the expansion of population, urbanisation and the market economy, supported by specific legislation (Devine, 1994). For the north and west of Scotland, this process encompassed the trauma of the Highland Clearances in which people were removed from the vast interior tracts offering the greatest scope for large-scale commercial sheep farming and resettled in the less fertile coastal areas where a ready labour force was required for the kelp² and fishing industries. Along with subsequent injustices and the resulting concentration of land ownership, the Clearances have left a scar on the Scottish psyche and ensured that the 'land question' has continued to occupy an important position in Scottish history and culture ever since (Cameron, 2001).

Despite the strong forces for privatisation, common land has never been eliminated completely. A number of vestigial common property institutions have survived to the present day in countries such as France, Norway, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Switzerland, Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland (Stevenson, 1991; Brouwer, 1995; Sevatdal, 1998; Short, 2000; Carlsson, 2001; De Moor *et al.*, 2002; Kissling-Naf, 2002). Indeed, a survey of English-language literature estimates that approximately 9% of the land area of Western Europe is historically enduring common land (Brown, 2005). The circumstances of their survival differ from case to case but often relate to having low agricultural productivity, being located in remote, upland areas (Netting, 1976), as well as the specificities of social and political struggle (Neeson, 1993; Yelling, 1977). In Scotland, the perseverance of crofting common grazings was aided by their codification in the legislation of the late nineteenth century that instated crofting as a formal system of land tenure.

The drive towards private property regimes was justified by their professed superiority for economic efficiency and 'improvement', or the avoidance of environmental degradation from over-use; ideas that continued to dominate theoretical resource use debates for many years (see Demsetz, 1967; Hardin, 1968; North & Thomas, 1973). Such thinking went largely unchallenged until the 1980s and 1990s when common-pool resource scholars drew attention to numerous empirical cases where common property institutions have been successfully organised to aid sustainable local-level management of resources held in common (McCay & Acheson, 1987; Ostrom, 1990; McKean, 1992), where they are not necessarily less efficient than private property (Stevenson, 1991).

Indeed, collective tenure has been revalorised in environmental management more broadly. Policy documents increasingly acknowledge that the provision of many environmental goods, such as landscape, amenity, habitats and biodiversity, and the avoidance of pollution and degradation, can only happen effectively on an ecologically appropriate scale; which usually necessitates management across farm or other legal boundaries (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2002). Common grazings have been noted for playing an important role in providing such public goods, and encompass many sites protected under the EC Birds and Habitats Directive, or as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) or designated as Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) (SCU & RSPB, 1992; Scottish Executive, 2005). With a functional

hefting system (hefting is a grazing practice whereby ewes and their offspring return every year to the same area of land), grazing pressure can be managed over a large unfenced area, which is particularly advantageous for bird species and is more likely to overlap with an ecologically appropriate scale of management (Backshall *et al.*, 2001; Hart, 2004).

In Scotland, collective land tenure has also been revalorised as part of a revived debate on the land question (for the history and development of the land reform debate in Scotland see Hunter, 1995; Bryden, 1996; Wightman, 1999; Bryden & Geisler, in press). Furthermore, practical moves have been undertaken to reverse the concentrated pattern of landownership, and associated economic and social stagnation, as a small but increasing number of communities have mobilised themselves to take collective ownership or management of local natural resources (MacAskill, 1999; Wightman & Boyd, 2001; MacPhail, 2002; Mackenzie, 2004). It is widely believed that the community buy-out of the North Lochinver Estate in Sutherland in 1993 by the Assynt Crofters Trust (ACT) was a defining moment for contemporary land reform, pushing it back up the political agenda and paving the way for many other communities to acquire land, for example: Eigg in 1997; Knoydart in 1999; Gigha in 2002; and North Harris Estate in 2003.

Official endorsement of this trend has come in the form of a community right-to-buy mechanism in the *Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003*, backed by public funding through the Community Land Unit. A key objective is enabling communities to take advantage of current economic opportunities, such as renewable energy generation.³ This renewed commitment to communal resource management reflects an approach increasingly found internationally, underpinned by notions of justice and social inclusion, where collective rights are seen as a vehicle for securing local resources, reproducing cultural identities, embracing multiple, diverse goals, and encouraging the growth of social capital (Pretty, 2003) and 'bottom-up' economic development (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; McCay, 2002; Johnson, 2004).

Example of Enduring Common Land: Crofting Common Grazings

In Scotland, crofting common grazings constitute the most prevalent form of historically enduring common land,⁴ where over 800 administrative units cover approximately 5,000 km² (Crofters Commission, 1999). Common grazings rights are normally linked to the tenancy of small individual plots of land known as 'crofts' or 'inbye'; a form of tenure unique to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. They are distributed primarily on the islands and coastal areas of the northern and western seaboard, stretching from the Argyll Islands in the south at latitude 55.6°, to Shetland in the north at latitude 60.8° (see Figure 1). The darker areas show the greatest concentrations of common grazings.

These areas are generally cool, wet and windy with salt-laden prevailing westerly winds, with rugged terrain that is frequently steep and/or uneven and punctuated by peat bogs. The land cover of common grazings is predominantly rough grazings consisting of heather moorland and peatland, but there are also small areas of woodland, improved grassland, bare rock and machair.⁵ The soils are generally poor, either having impeded drainage and low fertility or, on higher ground, being of a thin and fragile nature with a low rate of organic matter accumulation

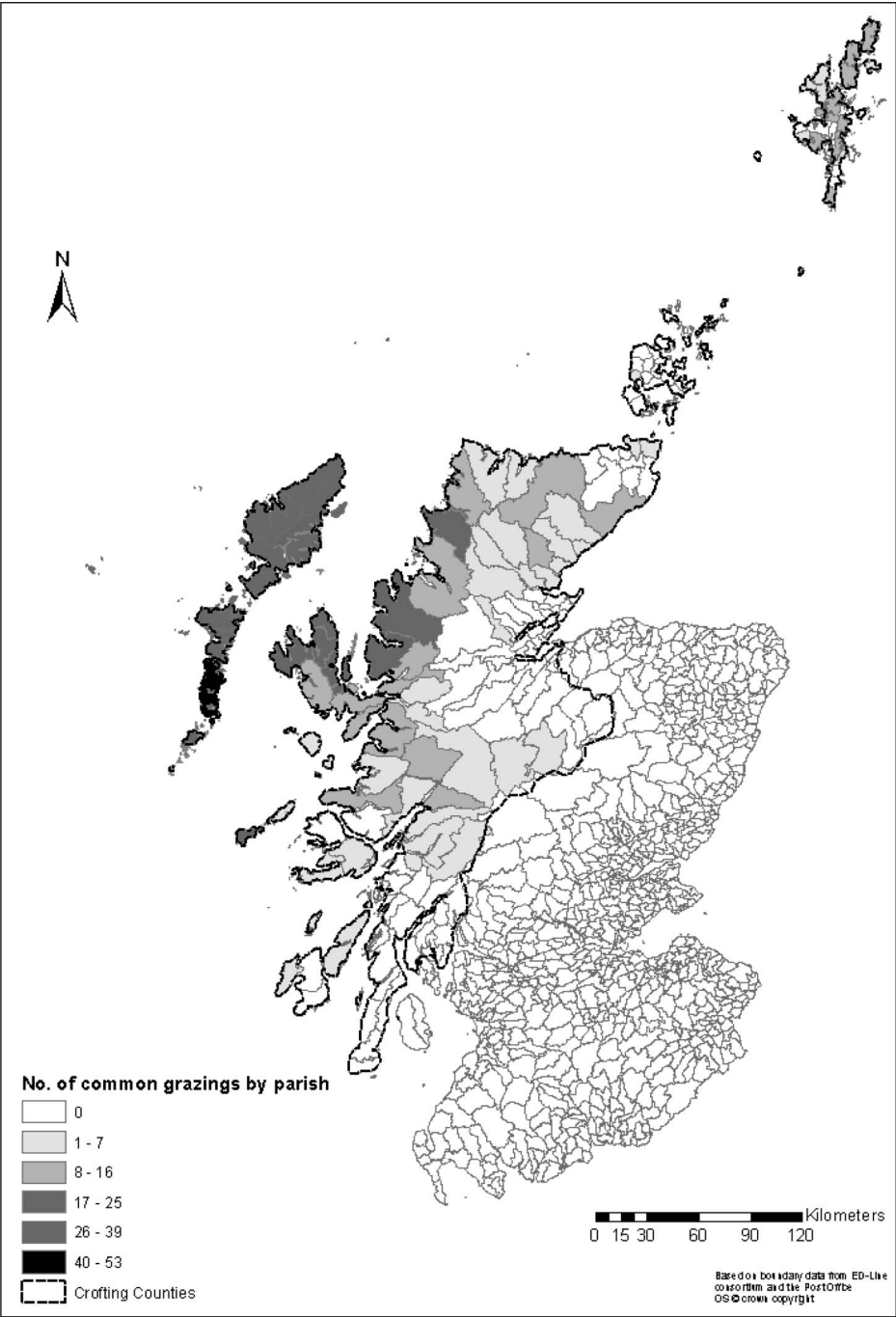


Figure 1. Spatial distribution of crofting common grazings

(SNH, 2002). These factors combine to make common grazings largely agriculturally marginal.

Common grazings are more prevalent in some counties than others; for example, they cover less than 20% of all mainland counties but account for over 50% of land area in Shetland and the Western Isles (see Figure 2). The average size of a common grazings is 617 ha, but can vary from 10 ha to 10,550 ha. Each common grazings unit can be constituted in more than one parcel. Normally, a small inner or coastal common grazings parcel is situated in close proximity to the village with a larger 'hill' parcel stretching onto higher ground away from it. Often no fence exists between the 'hill' sections of different township's individually regulated common grazings. Some areas, particularly in the Western Isles, also have 'General Commons' that are shared and regulated between multiple townships.

The original crofting legislation of the nineteenth century⁶ specified rights for grazing livestock, cutting peat and collecting seaweed, but allowed landlords to retain title to the land, and the sporting and mineral rights (Hunter, 1976; Devine, 1988). Subsequent legislation has amended and extended common grazings rights to allow crofters to: apportion part of the common grazings for exclusive use,⁷ recoup 50% of any development value of land resumed by the landlord, for example, for a house-site,⁸ and; collectively use any part of the common grazings to plant trees.⁹ However, the exercise of many of these rights is conditional upon securing permission from one or both of the Crofters Commission¹⁰ or the landowner. In addition, the crofting community right-to-buy mechanism in the *Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003* allows the enforced purchase of inbye and common grazings, including mineral, sporting and development rights, provided certain conditions are met.

At a local township¹¹ level, the formal arrangements for common grazings governance comprise a voluntary, elected Grazings Clerk who is responsible for administrative duties, and a voluntary, elected Grazings Committee, which has statutory powers and duties with respect to the management, maintenance and improvement of the resource, including making and enforcing Grazings Regulations (MacCuish & Flynn, 1990). The Grazings Regulations deal with aspects of stock management (e.g. fixing dates for the movement of stock and cooperative activities) and resource maintenance (e.g. enforcement of individual stock allowances known as 'soumings') and improvement (e.g. organising reseeding schemes). The regulations are not legally binding until confirmed by the Crofters Commission, which in turn must consult with the landlord. Any person in breach of the regulations is guilty of an offence under criminal law and can be given a penalty of up to £200.

Investigating Current Common Grazings Use and Governance

Methodological Approach

Few data have been collected in recent decades regarding the use and governance of crofting common grazings. It was, therefore, necessary to undertake survey work to gather data on: aspects of the crofting township of which the grazings are a part; the resource characteristics of the common grazings themselves; the nature and intensity of use; the attributes of the users; the institutional arrangements for the ownership

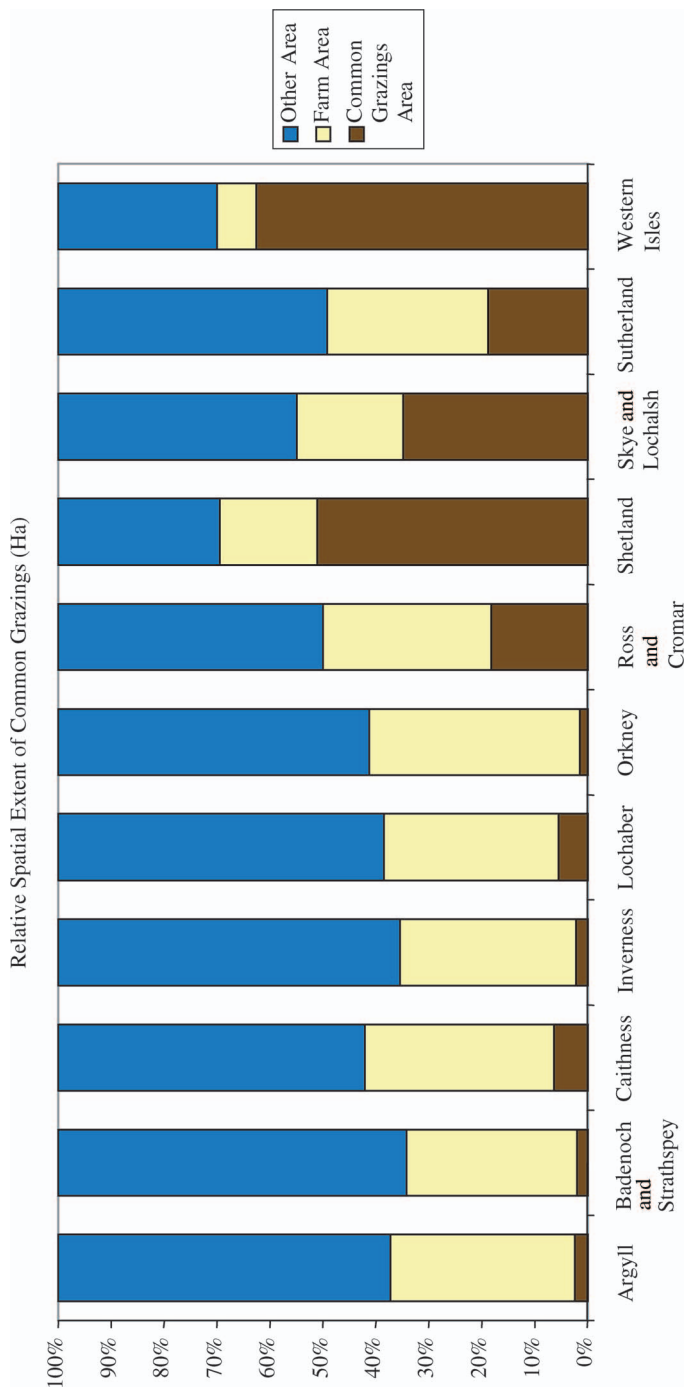


Figure 2. Relative spatial extent of common grazings (ha) (Source: Agricultural Census 1999)

and management of the grazings; and the degree and nature of collective engagement with public policy.

First, a scoping study was undertaken by conducting ten in-depth interviews with key informants from both formal and informal crofting-related institutions, allowing the identification of the most pertinent issues. Second, a postal questionnaire survey of Grazings Clerks, the individuals responsible for the administration of the common grazings, was conducted in early 2001. A mixture of closed and open-ended questions were employed in order to obtain comparable quantitative data for core aspects of resource use and resource users, but also to acquire qualitative data that provided some understanding of underlying explanations, meanings and motivations. A pilot survey of 20 Grazings Clerks with a return of 15 surveys provided the basis for a refined questionnaire, which was subsequently sent out to the entire population (767) of registered and thus contactable Grazings Clerks. Usable responses were received from 376 out of the 767 Grazings Clerks, which constitutes a return rate of 49%.

Contemporary Common Grazings Land Use and Governance

Overall, the survey results show a decline in the levels of use of common grazings, together with decreasing levels of involvement and investment by shareholders. This was frequently explained by the respondents to be the comparative financial advantage of off-croft employment in relation to livestock farming and the consequent time constraints precluding a full contribution to cooperative, extensive livestock production. Respondents established that grazings shares were formerly very much in demand, but that currently an average of 76% of shares are actually used, and the average proportion of shareholders exercising their rights is 50%. Respondents estimate this level of use comprises an average of 78% of the number of shareholders using the resource ten years ago, and most state that it is decreasing all the time. Some crofters have quit stock-keeping altogether, while others have continued to run stock on their 'inbye' land only. Peat-cutting, once a feature of virtually all common grazings, now only takes place in 40% of cases; and then often by only a small number of shareholders or a contractor.

Despite the overall decrease in grazing intensity, the grazing impact has not universally decreased but become more uneven spatially. It is now common to find simultaneous undergrazing and overgrazing on the same common grazings, because fewer stock are hefted to the hill, shepherding is now rare, and stock are frequently turned out on the nearest area of common grazings (sometimes just overnight), and remain close to the boundary fence in anticipation of being brought in or fed.

The extent of decline varies greatly between individual cases (Table 1). The average number of legally defined shareholders per common grazings is 28. Yet, on average, only seven of these actually use their shares. In all 9% of common grazings are in a situation of *de facto* privatisation with only one active shareholder; 12% of

Table 1. Variation of grazier numbers between common grazings

No. of graziers using common grazings	0	1	2	3	4	5 or more
Percentage of common grazings cases	7%	9%	12%	35%	26%	11%

common grazings are tending towards de facto privatisation, with only two active shareholders; and 7% of common grazings have effectively been abandoned completely. Only 11% of cases have five or more active shareholders. Many respondents stressed that most 'inactive' shareholders still attached a great deal of cultural and symbolic value to the common grazings, and that the majority of 'active' shareholders only secured token financial gain and sometimes subsidised their agricultural activity with pensions or off-croft employment.

There is also evidence for a decline in cooperative ways of working on common grazings (see Tables 2 and 3). Daily or weekly cooperation was once the norm, particularly for stock gathering and management, but now only occurs on 18% of common grazings, and a further 18% have no cooperation at all.

Table 3 shows that only 68% of common grazings have any communal stock gathering. Cooperative activities are typically carried out by 3–5 shareholders when once they were social occasions involving all shareholders and their families. Many 'active' shareholders are either in full-time employment or are elderly, which presents difficulties in assembling the required human resources at a mutually convenient time. Where common grazings size and topography does not permit crofters to gather their stock alone, shareholders decide whether to invest in working together with the other shareholders, hire contractors, or remove their stock altogether.

Local regulatory arrangements appeared to be weakening in tandem with declining use levels. Although more formal institutional elements are often still in place—for example, 96% of cases still have an official Grazings Committee registered with the Crofters Commission—these are generally less active, and command substantially less interest and respect than they did in former times. Previously, it was not uncommon for Grazings Committees to be considered as a relatively powerful form of local government, dealing with the issues central to the running of the township. Now it is generally very difficult to recruit committee members, and meetings are becoming increasingly rare and badly attended.

Table 2. Regularity of co-operation on common grazings

Regularity of co-operation	Mean percentage of cases
Every day	3%
Every few weeks	15%
Every few months	37%
Once or twice a year	27%
Never	18%

Table 3. Co-operative activities on common grazings

Collective activity	Stock gathering	Stock management (e.g. sheep dipping)	Resource maintenance (e.g. fencing repairs)	Resource improvement (e.g. reseeded)	Stock club ⁱ
Percentage of commons on which activity occurs	68%	49%	63%	24%	7%

ⁱIn a stock club a livestock herd is administrated and managed wholly as one unit in order to produce an annual dividend for shareholders.

Furthermore, 54% of Grazings Clerks concede that the Grazings Regulations are not adhered to or enforced. They reported that unused shares diminished the practical importance of many regulations, and that it was difficult to 'throw the book' at perpetrating shareholders who were struggling to make their agricultural enterprise viable.

The role now demanded of Grazings Clerks and Committees was felt to be less about regulating appropriation of resource 'units' and more about entrepreneurship and identifying and capturing a range of alternative benefit streams, usually from projects requiring competitive bidding and diversification. This view reflects the thrust of most rural policy delivery mechanisms, which identify Grazings Clerks and Committees as the obvious forum through which rural development projects can be taken forward, despite their legal construction as a framework for administering livestock grazing issues. Many Grazings Clerks reported feeling uncomfortable about this changing role. More than 55% of common grazings have not considered entry into one of the main schemes available, and fewer than 20% have had a proposal approved¹² (Figure 3). The qualitative evidence suggested both that shareholders found it increasingly difficult to agree on a common strategy because the group is more diverse in its outlook and objectives, and that on occasions projects were thwarted when permission from the landowner could not be secured. All such cases reported were private-owned, and conversely a greater proportion of common grazings in community or CART (Conservation, Amenity and Recreation Trust) ownership had undertaken schemes.¹³

The decline in commons use and regulation was not found to be universal. A minority of cases (8%) had over 80% of shareholders using the resource, cooperation at least every few weeks, enforced regulations and a committee meeting at least three times a year. Some of these cases had maintained levels of use and governance through established uses, such as sheep grazing, but were reported to be in a vulnerable position for the future due to participants becoming more elderly. A small number of other cases had sustained use and involvement through diversified activities, such as forestry, conservation management, tourism (e.g. nature trails, accommodation), and new sport and recreational uses (e.g. football, athletics and pony trekking). These are atypical, but show what is possible within the current institutional parameters when all the necessary funding, permissions and shareholder agreements are in place.

It was thought that there would be more regional difference in the use and involvement levels of common grazings, such as with respect to age-structure and proximity to urban centres and industry; for example, in crofting areas of Shetland and nearer Inverness it could be argued that a more buoyant economy and a younger population might have been linked to more dynamic resource use. However, the survey did not portray this. The variation in common grazings use and involvement had no discernable regional pattern; the picture was predominantly bleak everywhere, with atypical dynamic cases found in all areas. The only exception relates to the uptake of forestry schemes, for up until this time there was a widespread belief among shareholders that forestry was not particularly suited to the climate of the islands—a perception reflected in the distribution of successful crofter forestry applications (Crofters Commission, pers. comm.)—although this is changing now with evolving forest policy (e.g. the Western Isles Woodland Strategy, 2003). One reason that the

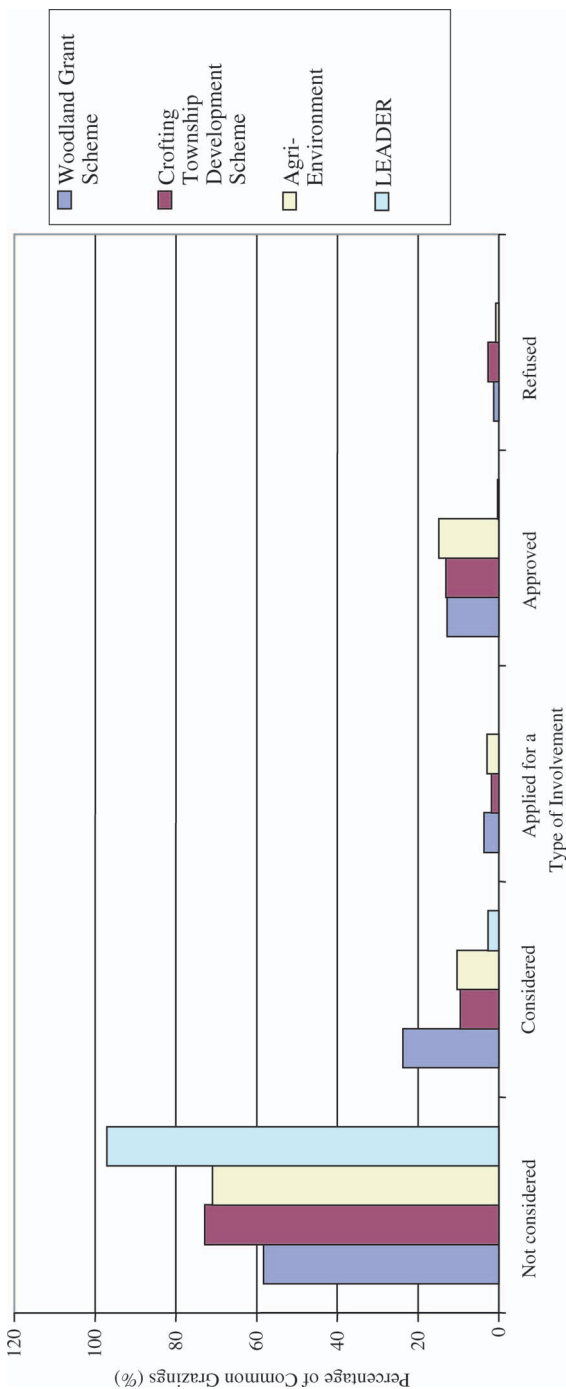


Figure 3. Common grazings-related engagement with development schemes

local economic context may not have been as influential as suspected is that—under the current institutional parameters at least—a healthy economy is a mixed blessing for common grazings: proximity to other income sources helps to keep (particularly younger) people on the crofts (and sometimes subsidises their continued agricultural involvement on the croft) but the time constraints of off-croft work often preclude their active involvement in common grazings use and management practices. More importantly, the lack of regional differentiation suggests that the trouble lies more with both overarching socio-economic and institutional factors than regional bio-physical and cultural specificities.

Contemporary Challenges for Historical Commons

Despite a general drive towards the revalorisation of communal land management systems, there are particular difficulties for common grazings in fulfilling such potential in contemporary rural circumstances. This survey has shown that: first, the use of common grazings is dwindling, with fewer shares used and fewer shareholders actively involved; second, the changing magnitude and spatial distribution of grazing pressure is leading to simultaneous overgrazing and undergrazing; and, third, monopoly, breakdown or stagnation of local common grazings governance is becoming more widespread. So although, in theory, there are many ways in which common grazings can produce social, environmental and economic benefits, few common grazings shareholders are currently willing to commit time, effort and money to commons use and management, at least within the established model of co-equal, extensive livestock production entrenched in the current prevailing institutional circumstances. Many shareholders see common grazings as a potential community asset, but only a small minority feel this to be realised.

Notably, unlike typical commons models, inciting ‘tragedy’ through the over-appropriation of resource units is not considered a key issue for these commons; the pertinent common grazings issue is not a general tendency to overuse. Therefore, we need to deepen understanding of why this situation is unfolding, because under-use and management can have important implications for the quality of life of both locals and visitors, in terms of the provision of environmental, social, and cultural public goods, and the maintenance of livelihoods. For example, the decreasing number of active land managers available to respond to policy instruments could jeopardise future attempts to facilitate multifunctional extensive agriculture considered central to the delivery of many environmental goods and services (Scottish Executive, 2002).

It is suggested that the disparity between potential and actual common grazings revalorisation exists for a number of reasons, which will be elaborated below, but which all seem to relate to the challenge of restoring or maintaining the salience of common land to shareholders. Direct dependence upon common grazings for livelihoods has declined; essentially because it is no longer viable to gain significant subsistence¹⁴ or pecuniary value from traditional uses of common grazings, and capturing value from the newer rural goods and services demanded has its own set of difficulties. Other than in terms of cultural and symbolic value, this common resource is simply not as salient to shareholders as much as it once was, and the character of their mutual interdependence has changed accordingly.

The common property literature has identified ‘salience’, or similarly ‘dependence’, as of substantial importance in providing impetus to the formation and evolution of effective institutions for communal resource management (Agrawal & Yadama, 1997; Ostrom, 2001; Gibson & Becker, 2000; Vatn, 2001; Gibson, 2001). Ostrom (2001) asserts that a resource is highly salient when ‘appropriators are dependent on the resource for a major portion of their livelihood or other important activity’ (p. 22), which matters because ‘if appropriators do not obtain a major part of their income from a resource...the high costs of organising and maintaining a self-governing system may not be worth their effort’ (ibid., p. 25). However, this literature is relatively silent regarding the identification and explanation of circumstances where salience or dependence is *not* high. The main factors found in this study to influence the salience of common grazings are discussed in turn.

Market Opportunities

A fundamental market-related challenge stems from the low returns generated by the long-established use of common grazings for hill livestock production. Market prices for store livestock are poor—and unlikely to improve significantly in the foreseeable future as the hill-farming sector in general is struggling to keep up with competition from places such as New Zealand (SEERAD, 2004; Defra, 2005). Declining livestock subsidies (Cook & Copus, 2002) have not been sufficient to halt a reduction in stock-keeping in most cases. Hence, there is a greater imperative to gain income from off-farm employment or diversification, either on the croft holding or on the common grazings. Many of the increasingly valorised aspects of common grazings, such as conservation, aesthetics and amenity, are less tangible than productivist aspects and have public good characteristics. Moreover, opportunities to capture the value of their provision directly through market mechanisms are relatively few. Shareholders with a holding in a suitable location sometimes capture such values indirectly through market mechanisms if they have a tourist facility such as bed and breakfast. However, non-shareholders are equally free to capture this value, so holding property rights to the resource does not confer any advantage in this regard. In addition, many shareholders are not in a suitable location or find that the local market opportunities are already saturated.

The other main market opportunity for common grazings is renewable energy generation. However, without making a transition to community ownership, Grazings Committees are relatively powerless to initiate such development as the landowner holds the key decision-making rights (as mediated through the planning system) and it is difficult to access the high levels of capital necessary for the purchase and installation of energy generation infrastructure. At present, shareholders are entitled to be compensated for 50% of the development value from such projects if the landowner chooses to go ahead with an energy generation scheme, but have little scope to participate in and shape appropriate proposals. Furthermore, some crofting areas have more potential for renewables than others: partly due to topographical and meteorological characteristics; partly due to the perceived conservation and landscape significance (and associated potential for controversy); and also due to differential ease and cost of connecting to the national grid.

Policy Framework

The public goods emphasis of the values increasingly attached to common grazings means that shareholders must rely heavily on policy for their economic capture. However, the prevailing policy framework has only allowed this to a limited degree due to its inadequate scope and restricted alignment to common grazings situations. Aside from the universal problems of agri-environment scheme under-funding, bureaucracy and over-generalised conditions, common grazings face additional difficulties from the tendency for them to be neglected in policy. The proposed common grazings reforms contained in the Crofting Reform Bill for Scotland signal the first serious attempts for a very long time to address commons-specific issues, such as lack of effective local regulation. However, some feel these reforms are insufficient and are eclipsed by other problems with the crofting system (SCF, 2005).

Furthermore, every time the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is reformed, the issue of common grazings is sidelined until the main policy mechanisms have already been developed and commons have to be subsequently force-fitted into them. For example, the Land Management Contract (LMC) system in Scotland—launched in 2005 as part of the most recent CAP reform to help farmers and crofters look after farm and woodland environment, maintain high standards of animal welfare, and provide access opportunities—leaves out common grazings completely, despite the fact that it makes up the majority of crofters' working land area. After pressure from the Scottish Crofting Federation, the Scottish Executive has signalled its intention to incorporate common grazings in the third tier of the LMC system.

The way common grazings has been incorporated into past agri-environmental schemes has also been criticised on a number of fronts. Significant barriers identified in the findings included the imposition of conditions, such as conservation areas having to be fenced, or the agreement of all shareholders being necessary for entry into the schemes, meaning that it only requires one awkward shareholder to halt progress in the scheme. Schemes can also have perverse side effects for commons, for example, measures such as stock reduction undermining the hefting system, which can be vital for stock management, even grazing pressure and animal welfare.

Moreover, the delivery of EU and UK government rural development policy in crofting areas increasingly employs competitive bidding as the primary mechanism for distributing resources for development projects and schemes. This demands that key representatives of common grazings shareholders (usually the Clerk or Committee members) must possess the awareness, skills and enthusiasm to facilitate the necessary consensus-building and to complete a 'winning' application. This scenario does not correspond well with the general picture of stagnation of local governance portrayed in the survey.

Legal Framework

Perhaps most fundamentally of all, the legal framework of crofting is not commensurate with the structures of entitlement and regulation required to allow the revalorisation of common grazings, particularly regarding diversification. The lack of effective legal mechanisms to back up local Grazings Regulations is a stumbling block for better resource management. The survey shows that current provisions

have failed to afford effective rule enforcement and have often allowed control of the common grazings to become concentrated in few hands.

Moreover, there is a fundamental incongruence between the bundle of rights held by shareholders, and the current economic opportunity set, as amply illustrated by the renewable energy issue mentioned above. Crofting is a complex system, in which the arrangements of common property rights still reflect to a large extent the (previously valid) assumption that livestock production is the main vehicle for gaining a livelihood from the land. The formal institutional framework has changed very little while the opportunities and constraints for exercising such common property rights have changed a great deal. Many resources perceived in common grazings today (e.g. biodiversity and wind power) were not recognised as such in previous codifications of crofting law, and therefore the common grazings rights lack detailed specification of rights to more recently valorised aspects, often leaving shareholders unclear as to how they can fit related opportunities to existing structures. Although over the years shareholders have acquired limited extra rights relating to apportionment, development and forestry, exercising them relies heavily upon the agreement of the landlord and/or the Crofters Commission.

In short, the current set of rights is partial and contingent, and to acquire the full rights through the recently added crofting community right-to-buy mechanism in the *Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003* requires the community to pass a set of criteria defined by the Scottish Parliament, which for most communities constitutes a giant leap from current, decaying common grazings governance structures. The Crofting Reform Bill (Scottish Executive, 2005) proposes measures to address the issues of regulation and allow diversified use. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how this will work in practice and whether it is sufficient to overcome these drawbacks, particularly as they combine with other factors identified here.

Demographic Change

Demographic change is affecting the number of crofters able and available to contribute to the communal tasks associated with common grazings. In most crofting areas, the population is ageing as access to housing, changing aspirations, diminishing profitability and growing uncertainty discourage the succession of young people willing to make crofting a key part of their livelihood strategy. The increasing socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity from in-migration also affects the number of active rights-holders as people can acquire common grazings rights with their holding but have no intention of using them. Older and fewer shareholders, thus, make it difficult to perform commons tasks efficiently, or indeed at all.

Some cases of common land have a 'cooperation threshold'; a critical number of participants below which gathering cannot occur due to the nature of the terrain. For example, sheep cannot be gathered on some common grazings without a minimum of five people, so when resource salience is such that fewer than five active graziers remain, the other four have to quit using the land even if it is still salient to them. Gathering requires substantial physical fitness and many older crofters struggle to do the job and lean more heavily on others in the group. Contractors can be used to help but they are expensive and do not always have the necessary local

knowledge to effect the ‘clean’ gather necessary for economic, health and welfare reasons.

Contested Cultural Values Relating to Land Use

Although the common property literature notes that ‘expected’, rather than ‘actual’, benefits are those that influence salience and provide impetus for collective management (Ostrom, 2001), it rarely problematises the corollary of this acknowledgement; that the opportunities to benefit from resource rights are only important to the extent that they are perceived as such by rights-holders. Resource salience is a function of market and policy drivers mediated and negotiated through the groups’ cultural values and moral norms. The values underpinning the opportunities provided by common grazings revalorisation are not always compatible with the interests and values of the shareholders. For example, chances to earn income from conservation management or forestry can be perceived as a threat to more ‘traditional’ crofting activities and a general challenge to crofting as a(n essentially agricultural) way of life, even if the former generate greater financial rewards.

Such tensions can also be manifest *amongst* the shareholders of a crofting township. Patterns of in-migration have introduced new common rights-holders, whose ideas, values and norms can differ greatly from those of the existing population (Stockdale *et al.*, 2000). The social dynamics amongst a more heterogeneous group of rights-holders affects the way values are attached to, and in turn captured from, the land, and can thus lead to difficulties harmonising common land objectives between established pastoral use and newer sources of economic impetus for using the land. Continued cooperative use and management of common grazings relies on a degree of congruence amongst shareholders regarding what they perceive as *legitimate* land use (see Brown, 2006 for further investigation of this issue). Indeed, congruence with cultural values may go some way to explain the small minority of cases that have managed to maintain or regenerate levels of common grazings use and involvement in governance. At the very least it shows that any explanation must engender more than pecuniary values alone. Further investigation is required to identify how cultural values relate to the other explanatory factors.

Conclusions

History has been severe with respect to rural common property regimes, and has forced its near—but not complete—elimination in Western Europe. Common grazings in the crofting areas of Scotland are one of a number of examples of common property that have survived. These common grazings are important not only for their historical and cultural significance, but because they constitute a considerable proportion of Scotland’s land resource. Nevertheless, as this paper demonstrates, such historical commons can face difficulties in fulfilling their potential for producing a range of social, economic and environmental benefits in a contemporary rural context. The survey found there is an overall decline in the use and governance of common grazings; a decreased number of shares are used by a dwindling number of shareholders, accompanied by reduced involvement in cooperative tasks and a lack of regulation enforcement. Consequently, the most

pertinent issue is under-use and not over-use, as is frequently (sometimes appropriately) the focus of common property debates.

Such decline stands in stark contrast to the recent conceptual, practical and policy-related revalorisation of collective land management systems evidenced in Scotland and beyond (Bryden & Geisler, in press), particularly with regard to the provision of public goods, such as those embracing amenity, aesthetic, habitat, biodiversity and cultural values. The key discrepancy between the current circumstances of common grazings use and governance and the renewed regard with which collective land management regimes are held can be explained with reference to a number of factors; predominantly relating to the low dependence upon or 'salience' of the resource to shareholders, which has been identified as important in common property debate (Ostrom, 2001), yet little explored.

The diminished financial viability of established uses, and hill livestock production in particular, has been compounded by a number of difficulties in capturing the contemporary value of the resource in pecuniary terms. The key challenges stem, first, from the prevalence of public good characteristics of contemporary common grazings assets, and the subsequent reliance on limited market opportunities and an imperfect policy framework to capture newer values. Agricultural policy in particular tends to neglect common land and its corollaries until the late stages of policy development when it is often force-fitted.

Second, and of central importance, the legal framework of common grazings is outdated due to: the incongruence between the current bundle of rights held by shareholders and the current economic opportunity set; the contingency of common grazings rights enactment on an inhibiting range of permissions and conditions; and the difficulty in making local regulations relevant and enforceable. A consideration of some of the recent community buy-outs gives an indication of the initiatives—particularly regarding renewable energy—that could be taken forward on common grazings in a less anachronistic institutional framework (Conway, 2001; Currie, 2002; Reid, 2003; www.north-harris.org; www.gigha.org.uk).

Third, demographic change can exacerbate difficulties in that a decreasing, ageing population means fewer people physically able to carry out cooperative tasks, and the increasing socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity of shareholders, stemming from in-migration, can lead to a broader range of ideas, approaches and objectives that must be accommodated in land use.

Last, as common grazings are valued in an increasing variety of ways by an increasing diversity of people, there is greater scope for contestation over precisely whose cultural values are to be supported and articulated through common grazings use and governance. The degree of harmony between financially lucrative land use and what the shareholders consider culturally legitimate use of common grazings, as well as the congruence of values amongst the shareholders themselves, affects the perception, and exploitation, of opportunities. Salience can only exist to the extent that it is perceived by, and negotiated amongst, group members, regardless of any exogenous measure of actual or potential benefits for livelihoods or other measure of well-being.

Hence, if common grazings are to fulfil their potential role in the contemporary reconstitution of the commons, there are two pertinent issues to be taken into account. On the one hand, sufficient salience of the land with respect to shareholders'

livelihoods must be restored or maintained by capturing contemporary resource values, and thus providing impetus for collective land management. Although opportunities differ from case to case and area to area, there remains an inherent institutional incongruence with modern rural circumstances—particularly regarding policy and property right arrangements—that could be constructively addressed. On the other hand, there is the challenge of harmonising the broader range of values and objectives implicated in such use and management.

The Crofting Reform Bill (Scottish Executive, 2005) may go some way towards ameliorating the situation in terms of updating regulation enforcement mechanisms and allowing diversified use. Similarly, the crofting community right-to-buy mechanism in the *Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003* may help shareholders to acquire a more relevant bundle of rights. Nevertheless, these measures do not address the other constraints identified in this study. Possible institutional and policy changes that would help to minimise these difficulties for common grazings include:

- Improved policy development protocols to ensure collective land management arrangements are systematically taken into account in policy development;
- Improved policy mechanisms for encouraging the capture of value from public goods provision (e.g. measures for conservation or tourism initiatives on common grazings);
- An audit of current policy for ‘collective-friendliness’ to identify current institutional barriers to capturing value from collective rights;
- Measures to provide favourable access to capital for projects with high start-up costs (e.g. wind power);
- Institutional change that recognises the heterogeneity of shareholders, to allow them to play to their various strengths (in terms of skills, assets and interests) and put in and take out resources in different ways and to different degrees, and enables sub-groups to cooperate where relevant;
- Improved policy support to enable shareholders to take incremental steps towards extended rights and responsibilities to provide some middle ground between current common grazings stagnation and full community ownership.

Notes

¹ Most scholars agree that a common property regime is a type of management arrangement in which a well-defined group of people jointly hold exclusive rights (not necessarily co-equally) to the use of a defined resource unit, in which individual members have rights and duties with respect to use rates, and resource maintenance and improvement (Bromley, 1991; Stevenson, 1991; Baland & Platteau, 1996).

² Kelp is an alkali extract from seaweed that was used in the manufacture of soap and glass.

³ The Scottish Executive’s commitment to securing increased energy from renewable sources such as wind, wave and biomass means that renewable energy generation now represents one of the most lucrative uses to which common grazings can be put. See the Renewables Obligation (Scotland) 2002, which states that Scotland must contribute to the total of 10% of the UK’s energy requirements that must come from renewable sources by 2010.

⁴ There are other less extensive examples such as village greens, common mosses and commonties (see Callander, 2003).

⁵ Machair is fertile, low-lying, base-rich, sandy coastal meadows of high conservation value (Warren, 2002).

⁶ *Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886 & Crofters Common Grazings Regulation Act 1891*.

- ⁷ *Crofters (Scotland) Act 1955*.
- ⁸ *Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 1976*.
- ⁹ *Croftier Forestry (Scotland) Act 1991*.
- ¹⁰ The Crofters Commission is a quasi-governmental body devoted solely to the development and regulation of crofting.
- ¹¹ A 'township' is the collective term given to the aggregation of land covered by both the crofts and the common grazings of a particular crofting locality or village.
- ¹² Through schemes such the WGS (Woodland Grant Scheme), RSS (Rural Stewardship Scheme), a Habitat Management Scheme, or through being an area designated as a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) or as ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Areas).
- ¹³ However, caution had to be exercised in generalising about ownership from this data because: a) cases in CART or community ownership were much fewer in number precluding a full statistically valid analysis; b) each ownership type featured vibrant and less vibrant common grazings at the time of the survey; and c) a key point emerging from the survey was that the structure of property rights and relations of common grazings is anachronistic regardless of ownership status per se. There was no discernable difference in common grazings dynamism between estates that were privately owned and those owned by SEERAD.
- ¹⁴ For example, the growth in convenience and relative affordability of oil-fired central heating has in many cases precluded the former necessity of cutting peat for fuel, and the widespread availability of milk through retail outlets means that keeping a house cow 'to provide households' dairy products is no longer essential.

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