

## Foreword

**By The Right Honourable The Viscount of Arbuthnott D.S.C., M.A., F.R.I.C.S.,  
Deputy Chairman, Nature Conservancy Council**

This Symposium has gathered together the recorded knowledge of the natural environment of the Inner Hebrides and has also described the use of their natural resources for traditional and conventional exploitation by man at sea and on land. There have been changes in the intensity of human use, particularly at sea, through the introduction of new technology, but nowhere has it yet been suggested that over-exploitation has caused irreparable loss.

Twenty five years ago, the words conservation and environment formed no part of our common speech and certainly had no special meaning for those who lived and worked on the western seaboard and the Hebrides. Now these words have taken on a new meaning and a greater significance. Conservation, defined as the wise use of natural resources, must now include the further dimension of the control of development so that development itself is sustainable. The meaning of environment also broadens to encompass the quality of life pervading the work place of a community as well as the mere constituents of landscape.

The long term welfare of the land and of those who live by it and the resources of the seas must envisage the development of all available resources and not least the ingenuity of man himself, within a caring and intelligent understanding of what is sustainable.

I first visited the Inner Hebrides in 1956 when, at the invitation of Lady Bullough, the owner of Rhum, I stayed on the island as the Scottish land agent for the Nature Conservancy in order to produce a report upon which Council could better consider the wish of Lady Bullough that the Conservancy should become the owners of Rhum. The island had already been promoted as a potential nature reserve in the Command Report 7814 'Nature Reserves in Scotland' which stated, among other attributes to its importance for nature conservation that 'Most of the island is deer forest; there is little woodland and little cultivation, for the total human population is under twenty. Its flora and fauna are of much scientific interest. It has fine cliffs for sea birds, one species of which, the Manx shearwater, breeds high up on the hills. Isolated, yet within easy reach of the mainland, it would make an outstanding station for research and experiment, and indeed is the most suitable island for this purpose in Scotland'.

Such an acquisition would be a major development in the reserve management programme of the Nature Conservancy and envisaged a pronounced shift of policy to active land use for nature conservation purposes akin to that favoured by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Forestry Commission in their land purchases for agriculture and afforestation. It had always been understood that these two major departments of State included positive social as well as economic reasons for their acquisition of land in the more remote areas of Scotland. It was to be so in

the case of the Nature Conservancy and its ownership of Rhum and must remain so today.

The first management plan for the Island of Rhum, after its declaration as a National Nature Reserve in 1957, affirmed as a fundamental principle of management that 'the research and conservation programme on Rhum will be directed to the long term welfare of the island and its inhabitants, and that no economic activity will be pursued which conflicts materially with this basic requirement'. Twenty years later, after three revisions of the plan, we may consider how that resolution stands up to the questions posed in this Symposium.

In 1957 the Nature Conservancy inaugurated the most searching studies into the natural environment of Rhum and at the same time laid plans for restoring the highest level of biological productivity that can be sustained naturally 'measured in terms of population levels and species composition of appropriate fauna and flora'. The only economic activity that has ceased is that of sheep farming and in its place, admittedly from a low base, there has grown an impressive and demanding public interest and use which, with the continuing scientific conservation work, has raised the economic activity of the inhabitants of the island to a level unsurpassed in the last 70 years while the quality of their life has remained undiminished.

Nevertheless, it was no easy task to change from the mildly despotic rule of the Bullough period to an active nature reserve management programme. There was immediate criticism on the grounds that the suggested removal of sheep, even though initiated by the farming tenant giving notice to quit of his own accord, would mean another Highland clearance. A university pundit wrote to the *Glasgow Herald* and quoted Tacitus to the effect that we had created a desert and called it peace! Yet the Conservancy itself was caught at a disadvantage by underestimating the astonishing ability of vegetation to recover after the sudden removal of a dominant grazing regime in the environmental conditions that obtain on the Atlantic seaboard. Utilisation and planned development were indeed necessary ingredients of any conservation plan.

The enclosure of 3000 acres for the planting of forest species once widespread in the Hebrides, the building of three new houses (one a schoolhouse) and a community hall, the stricter management of the indigenous deer stock and its culling for control and sporting purposes allied to a scientific research programme, the introduction of a fold of pedigree Highland Cattle and the retention of the well-known and ancient herd of Rhum ponies for breeding and stalking use, the maintenance of Kinloch Castle as a heritage building and visitor centre should be capable of demonstrating a diverse and practical use of the island at a cost consistent with its importance to the community of the Small Isles and not at variance with the wider needs of the conservation work of the Nature Conservancy Council in the U.K.

My latest journey to another Inner Hebridean island was my first to Islay, earlier this year, in my capacity as President of the Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society, the representative organisation for the promotion and development of co-operation in agriculture. The main purpose of the visit was to open an extension to the premises of the thriving island co-operative, Islay Farmers. I was also given the opportunity to see enough of the island and its production opportunities to disabuse me of a previously held belief that Islay was in any agricultural sense, a garden of Eden. Relatively indeed, in contrast to most other Hebridean islands, it has a

potential for a local agricultural industry that is better served by indigenous industrial processes and proximity to markets but, for all that, the scope for expansion or development is modest and the agricultural community, while increasingly of economic importance as other outlets for labour diminish, has to strive ever harder to win a living, thus co-operative enterprise is ever more significant. In this competitive atmosphere in the aftermath of a decline in the prosperity of island life and community growth, the needs of conservation and sustained development as a combined strategic concept for the future will need leadership and understanding of a high order.

The Hebrides have been visited by the inquisitive and acquisitive for 200 years as this Symposium has shown and each in his way has sought to exploit the natural environment to gain a better knowledge of it or a living from it. Little has altered in their desires but much has changed in their technique and we must now forge the link between demand and methodology to ensure wise use and sustainable development.

So today we are seeking to determine in the United Kingdom a response to the World Conservation Strategy and to reconcile conservation and development within a wider and more mature comprehension of the needs of mankind. Within this concept it is unfortunate that there are still those who see an Integrated Development Programme for the Outer Hebrides solely as a direct threat to the natural environment and seem oblivious of any real conservation perspective in pursuing their arguments for special safeguards.

The setting up of yet another adversarial argument which is in effect a choice between birds and people is totally unproductive and now unrepresentative of the responsible thrust of conservation thinking. Hopefully this Symposium has taken us another rational step forward in the contemporary debate to achieve a compatible resolution to such problems in the Inner Hebrides.

ARBUTHNOTT

Arbuthnott House  
Laurencekirk  
Kincardineshire  
September 1982