

Preserving Scotland's Agricultural Heritage: A Key Component of Biodiversity



When we think of biodiversity, we often think of wildlife, or perhaps picture unusual plants, rare birds, and obscure insects. However, biodiversity is not just about protecting wildlife; it's also about preserving our rich agricultural heritage. The importance of preserving our agricultural biodiversity must not be underestimated. Native landraces, vegetable varieties, and animal breeds, are more crucial than we may realise.

Agricultural heritage plays a crucial role in maintaining biodiversity by preserving the genetic diversity of crops and livestock. This genetic diversity is essential for food security, as it allows us to return to some varieties, and develop new varieties, that are better adapted to changing conditions. This will become

increasingly important as the impacts of climate change become more severe.

Of course, agricultural heritage includes all the knowledge, practices, and resources that communities have developed over innumerable generations to sustainably produce food and other products from the land and the resources around them. Landraces, vegetable varieties, and animal breeds are all integral parts of this heritage and have often evolved to suit the unique terroir and climate conditions around them.

It must not be forgotten that this does not happen by chance but has developed through a sort of assisted evolutionary process, over centuries of agricultural trial and error, as

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land managers explored what would work and what wouldn't within the parameters of their own local set of land limitations and climatic challenges.

Unfortunately, many traditional landraces, vegetable varieties, and animal breeds are at risk of disappearing due to the demands of industrial agriculture and the market demands imposed by changing lifestyles and values, changing consumer habits, and supermarket chains' constant drive towards maximising profits. Many crofters and farmers are pushed to the limit trying to maximise output to remain viable, often having to take on supplementary employment off-farm, which has led to a loss of more traditional mixed farming practices where there was more space for slower maturing or lower yield products.

The current push to use the very blunt tool of carbon auditing to drive agricultural change and make our agricultural practices more 'efficient' may not be entirely conducive to preserving genetic diversity either – in livestock production there are certainly worrying trends, perhaps unwittingly, focusing our attention on one-size-fits-all performance efficiency rather than taking a more rounded place-based approach which would pay greater attention to biodiversity and performance adaptability. Any further loss of genetic diversity in agriculture will certainly have serious consequences for food security and the environment in equal measure.

In Scotland we are very lucky to still boast a healthy number of native breeds and varieties. Amongst the landraces, our traditional crop varieties, we have a wide variety of native ryes and bere barleys, as well as a number of types of black oats from Shetland Aets to Caithness Murkle – cultivated by farmers through the centuries to suit local growing

conditions. As well as being well-adapted to their environment, they often have unique characteristics that make them valuable for food production, forage uses, heritage crafts, and a variety of other uses.

Black oats and Murkle are still grown in significant quantities on the Machair in the Western Isles as they can cope with the high pH soils and are not adversely affected by manganese deficiency. They will grow and thrive where other more modern varieties would struggle or perish. In Shetland there is currently a successful heritage programme to revive the area's critically endangered local straw crafts, which has led to the realisation that the Shetland Aets used to produce these crafts are also critically endangered. There may be as little as five kilos of seed left in total. The programme organisers at the Shetland Amenity Trust are currently looking for local crofters to grow small areas of the crop with the two-fold aim of increasing seed stock and satisfying the demand the trust's craft workshops have created for the straw.

Similarly, we fortunately still have a wide selection of native vegetable varieties, from Shetland Kale and the Musselburgh Leek to a good number of heritage potato varieties such as Edzell Blue, Arran Victory or the Auchtermuchty Majestic. Again, these have often been selected and cultivated over time for specific traits such as disease resistance, yield, or flavour.

Many of our native breeds have also been developed over centuries to thrive in specific environments and to meet specific needs. They often have unique and outstanding flavour and quality profiles – just think of North Ronaldsay Lamb, Belted Galloways or the Shetland hogget and its wool.

There are clear benefits to encouraging

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conservation efforts which look to protect our agricultural biodiversity. More often than not, these will dovetail perfectly with wider efforts to protect biodiversity in wildlife and nature while also promoting best practice for habitat management and improvement.

The Scottish Government has already recognized the importance of preserving agricultural heritage and has launched initiatives to support farmers and crofters in their efforts to preserve traditional varieties and breeds. One such initiative is the SASA Scottish Landrace and Variety Register, which aims to preserve and promote their use. The register includes a wide range of crops and animals, from traditional potato varieties to rare breeds of cattle and sheep. Slow Food Scotland and the Ark of Taste also provide support and opportunities for those interested in preserving and celebrating our culinary heritage. However, much more needs to be done if we are to see heritage breeds and

varieties more widely available to consumers and better supported with clear routes to market at a price that reflects their true value.

As we can see from developments in other sectors such as tourism, there is growing consumer demand for the unique and the authentic. There is also a strong body of evidence from other countries, such as Italy and Spain, that regional quality marks and collective provenance marketing schemes built around regional specialities which can't be replicated elsewhere can be key drivers in rural economic growth. With the right support and development there are extensive opportunities to leverage our agricultural heritage for truly sustainable development, revitalising rural communities, building resilience, delivering environmental benefits, and creating more opportunities for young people to stay, return to, or move to rural areas.

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