

PE2021/I: Ensure the definition of protected animals in the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 applies to the sheep on St Kilda

Dr Mary Harman written submission, 17 April 2024

Sheep on Boreray and Soay.

All descriptions of the St Kilda islands that mention livestock refer to cattle, horses, and for some time goats, being kept only on Hirte, the main island, where areas around the village were also cultivated.

Sheep were not shorn; the wool was shed naturally in the summer, and generally they were caught and the fleece plucked off: 'rooing' before it fell off.

The earliest reference to sheep specifically on Boreray and Soay is by Moray, c 1682, describing both islands as having good quality pasture, the ewes regularly bearing twins. From the mid seventeenth century there is general agreement that the sheep on Soay belonged to the proprietor.

MacAulay [1758], a Gaelic speaker, refers to some management practices; older ewes were taken to Boreray where better grazing extended their lambing years; it was difficult to catch sheep on Soay either to fleece them or to take some back to Hirte.

A number of nineteenth century authors refer to islanders visiting Soay, sometimes for several days, to fleece sheep; one says all the wool was requisitioned by the proprietor, another that the islanders retained half of it as payment; some say that fleece was not taken every year. Visits were also made to take sheep off for food, including in winter for a New Year feast; a small payment was made to the proprietor; on at least on occasion [1886] carcasses were salted for the winter and twenty were sent back to the proprietor the following year. The flesh had a good flavour. Mrs MacLachlan noted in her diary sheep being taken from Soay every year between 1906 and 1909, including on two different occasions receiving a wedder.

The sheep on Boreray belonged to individual islanders who paid an annual grazing fee for each animal. Trips of several days were made to Boreray to collect eggs and to fleece the sheep, and to take sheep off; Ferguson (1885) refers to ropes being used to land sheep on Boreray and to remove them, several authors refer to taking sheep off Boreray for slaughter, including Mrs MacLachlan who noted this every year between 1906 and 1909. The last account of this practice refers to a hazardous trip in October 1926, when the men struggled to return in wind and heavy seas, arriving back at 2 am. There are unlikely to have been many later trips as by 1928 the total population had declined to 36.

The various accounts indicate that for the two centuries before the evacuation sheep were probably removed from Soay for food in most years, and were fleeced in some years, while more regular expeditions to Boreray were made to fleece their own sheep and to put sheep on or take them off, generally for slaughter. It is probable that the islanders, knowing of shepherding practices on Harris and adjacent islands, would have castrated a number of ram lambs to reduce rams fighting, and would

attempt to limit the population to the carrying capacity of the grazing. It seems likely that some management of the sheep on all the islands was carried out from the time the islands were stocked with sheep, as happened for at least the last four centuries on other offshore islands such as the Flannans and the Shiant isles.

In the late nineteenth century, the importance of cheese made partly from ewes milk, and tallow, as rent payments declined, while tweed increased; and tweed was also purchased by an agent on the mainland in the twentieth century, so the wool crop assumed greater importance economically.

Note about the author

Dr Harman has visited and stayed on St Kilda many times and participated in an expedition to Boreray. She has researched and written a definitive history of St Kilda: *An Isle called Hirte: a History and Culture of St Kilda to 1930*.