

# COMMUNITY LANDOWNERS AND THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

## Managing Peatland Carbon Sinks

Urras Oighreachd Chàrlabhaigh  
(Carloway Estate Trust)

COMMUNITY\*  
LAND SCOTLAND

## CASE STUDY



# Introduction

Scotland has declared a climate emergency and committed to becoming carbon-neutral by 2045. The community landowning sector is contributing towards this goal.

Community Land Scotland has commissioned research to document action that the sector is taking to address climate change. Alongside a report looking at the sector as a whole, six case studies have been produced.

Each of the case studies looks in depth at one asset-owning community organisation and how it is contributing to a particular aspect of climate action, namely: renewable energy; managing 'carbon sinks'; helping people to adapt to the effects of climate change, and; reducing emissions related to food, transport and domestic energy use.

Each case study also looks at the wider work of the community owner in relation to the climate emergency and the diverse benefits this is providing.

This case study features Urras Oighreachd Chàrlabhaigh (Carloway Estate Trust) in Lewis.

The Trust is a partner in the national Peatland ACTION programme. It is helping people across the Outer Hebrides to restore peatland, keeping carbon locked in the ground.

The Trust is also working with people on the Carloway Estate to reduce domestic emissions and tackle fuel poverty.

It has plans for further initiatives which will address the climate emergency while delivering social and economic benefits.

## KEY MESSAGES

### Community landowners:

- ✓ are contributing to the national effort to lock up carbon in peatland and other 'carbon sinks'. Carloway Estate Trust is a partner in the national Peatland ACTION programme.
- ✓ are trusted by local people, making them valuable partners when it comes to engaging communities in climate action.
- ✓ have strong local networks. They can use these to enable collaboration to address the climate emergency.
- ✓ are helping to deliver a Just Transition to net zero. They integrate climate action with local needs and priorities.



The Carloway Estate is a 4650 hectare crofting estate on the west side of Lewis. It was bought by the community in 2015, and is managed on behalf of the 600 residents by Urras Oighreachd Chàrlabhaigh (Carloway Estate Trust).  
[www.carlowayestatetrust.co.uk](http://www.carlowayestatetrust.co.uk)



Carloway Estate. Photo: Iain MacArthur.

## Peatland ACTION in the Outer Hebrides

Carbon sinks – such as woodlands, peatlands and soils – are reservoirs that absorb and store the atmosphere’s carbon, reducing the contribution of this greenhouse gas to climate change.

Managing and using the land so as to reduce atmospheric carbon is an important part of society’s response to the climate emergency.

Peatlands cover more than 20% of Scotland’s land area. They store carbon which is equivalent to 140 years’ worth of Scotland’s total annual greenhouse gas emissions<sup>1</sup>. When peatlands erode they emit some of this carbon back into the atmosphere.

An estimated 80% of Scottish peatlands are degraded and peatland restoration is an important part of the national Climate Change Plan. In February 2020, the Scottish Government announced a £250 million 10-year funding package to support the restoration of 250,000 hectares of degraded peat by 2030.

The Peatland ACTION Project – run by the national agency, NatureScot – has been supporting peatland restoration since 2012. So far, 25,000 hectares have been put on the path to restoration across Scotland.

The Project provides funding to support on-the-ground restoration activities, such as ground works that stabilise areas of erosion or the damming of ditches to raise the water level and allow peat-forming mosses to re-establish themselves.

A network of local Peatland ACTION officers provides advice and support to landowners and communities, helping them to develop restoration projects and get them off the ground. Some officers are based with NatureScot; others are hosted by partner organisations.

In the Outer Hebrides, NatureScot’s Peatland ACTION partner is community landowner Urras Oighreachd Chàrlabhaigh (Carloway Estate Trust).

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“We were looking to have the [Peatland ACTION Officer] post hosted outside of NatureScot so it would be seen to be independent and working in its own right. There is a strong network of community landowners ... Being able to engage in that network given that scale is a huge resource.”

David MacLennan, NatureScot Unit Manager, Argyll & the Outer Hebrides



Eroding peat hags, Calanais. Photo: Carloway Estate Trust.

<sup>1</sup> NatureScot ([www.nature.scot/climate-change/nature-based-solutions/peatland-action-project](http://www.nature.scot/climate-change/nature-based-solutions/peatland-action-project))

A large proportion of the land in the Outer Hebrides – around 44% – is owned by communities<sup>2</sup>. As well as being responsible for significant areas of peatland, these communities have built a strong local network and collaborate on a wide range of initiatives.

The expansion of community ownership has led to increased interaction between community bodies and NatureScot on environmental issues.

Based on that experience, NatureScot could see the benefits of partnering with a community landowner to deliver the Peatland ACTION Project.

After a competitive process, Carloway Estate Trust (CET) was selected as the local partner, and CET appointed Ben Inglis-Grant to the Project Officer post in 2018.

Since 2018, restoration projects have been carried out at three sites at Arnol and Loch Orasaigh in Lewis, covering a total of 69 hectares.

Further restoration projects are currently being developed elsewhere in the islands.

Ben works with landowners and others across the Outer Hebrides. Being based within a community landowner has made it easier for him to engage with local community groups and organisations.

The partnership with CET allows the Peatland ACTION Project to benefit from the trust and relationships that the community landowner has built up over the years and the central role it already plays in people's lives.

CET is known as an organisation whose work benefits local residents. As part of a strong network of community landowners in the Outer Hebrides, it can also help to facilitate Peatland ACTION across the islands.

The success of the Peatland ACTION Project depends in no small part on the ability of its Officers to engage effectively with stakeholders such as grazings committees, which decide how much of the

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“The ongoing role of crofting ... in terms of habitat management is vital ... Crofters are going to be vital in our response to combating climate change.”

David MacLennan, NatureScot Unit Manager, Argyll & the Outer Hebrides

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“An external organisation or an external project coming in could be viewed with scepticism whereas if it comes from the community landowner there is generally an acceptance that it's for the community's benefit ... there's an element of trust and getting the doors open to start talking about these things that comes from being part of the community.”

Ben Inglis-Grant, Peatland ACTION Officer, Carloway Estate Trust

2 Scottish Government ([www.gov.scot/publications/community-ownership-scotland-2019](http://www.gov.scot/publications/community-ownership-scotland-2019))

peatland is used.

One of the biggest concerns around peatland restoration has been that it might constrain traditional crofting practices. However, collaboration has enabled both NatureScot and crofters to understand that a holistic approach to conservation and use of the land can bring multiple benefits.

Peatland restoration can enhance both habitats for wildlife and grazing for animals. It can reduce the amount of peat in water sources, improving the quality of the local water supply. And it has potential financial benefits for local communities through the developing market for carbon credits.

In working with community landowners, Peatland ACTION is able to benefit from the long tradition of domestic peat cutting in this part of Scotland, and the cultural value that people place on good peatland management and use.

The approach to restoration in the Outer Hebrides has recognised the importance of maintaining traditional peat-cutting practices which ensure minimal degradation to the peatlands.

Conversations between the Peatland ACTION Project Officer and residents have identified how potentially competing objectives of restoration and use can be reconciled, for example by relocating peat cutting activities to ensure restoration can take place.

Forging a link between the national programme and a community landowner has also helped to raise awareness within communities about the climate emergency and the need to take action.

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“This could allow our communities to carry on doing what we’re doing and bring in revenue, that’s great .... crofting can be part of the solution.”

Donald MacKinnon, Local Development Officer, Carloway Estate Trust

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“Even in the time Ben’s been here, the difference in perspective about the climate emergency, climate awareness has changed dramatically within communities.”

Sally Reynolds, Development Manager, Carloway Estate Trust



Peatland restoration underway at Loch Orasaigh. Photo: Carloway Estate Trust.

Community landowners are well placed to lead on climate action and to link it with the broader needs of their community and place.

Community-led climate initiatives often address both the climate emergency and wider social, economic and environmental concerns.

CET is working to address the climate emergency on a number of fronts, and embedding climate action in the development of their community.

With the support of the national Climate Challenge Fund, CET is providing **free low-power LED light bulbs** to local residents, as well as **energy advice**.

This has both reduced domestic carbon emissions and helped to tackle fuel poverty.

CET's plans include **renewable energy generation**, potentially linked to the development of **electric**

**transport infrastructure** and **district heating systems**.

This initiative would further reduce carbon emissions and fuel poverty, while also providing an income which the organisation would re-invest in the community.

The main barrier to this development lies in the local electricity grid infrastructure, which cannot currently support ambitious schemes of this kind.

Other plans include a **community grocery shop**, sourcing local produce and reducing food miles.

A **workshop space** is being acquired from the local authority and this will be used to promote reuse and repair, reduce waste and provide opportunities for social interaction and skills-sharing.

The land surrounding the workshop will

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“There's ... examples of pretty major life-changing outcomes, where people just didn't know who to contact to get their windows upgraded to double-glazing, and getting pointed in the right direction to get insulation and heating systems replaced. Things that really changed people's lives.”

Donald MacKinnon, Local Development Officer, Carloway Estate Trust

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“People ... are seeing the effects first hand of climate change. So ... as a community we're so closely connected to energy and climate that it's just so natural that so many of our projects are connected to that.”

Sally Reynolds, Development Manager, Carloway Estate Trust

be used as an **educational garden**, developing skills while producing food for the community shop.

CET has also partnered with other community landowners in the local **Climate Action Group**. This Group has been formed under the auspices of the Community Planning Partnership

of Western Isles Council and has actively sought to engage community organisations in its work.

A **climate change adaptation plan** designed by community landowners will contribute to the local authority's discussions.

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“There are going to be significant challenges and the community need to be actively involved in these conversations .... We are looking at how we can have community engagement and involvement in how plans are developed and delivered. It's critical that the community is onside with whatever is decided to be done.”

David MacLennan, NatureScot Unit Manager, Argyll & the Outer Hebrides, and Chair of the Western Isles Climate Action Group



Providing energy saving advice. Photo: Carloway Estate Trust.

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Front cover: Residents of the Carloway Estate improving access to the peatlands. Photo:  
Carloway Estate Trust

Base map on p. 2 designed by Exclusive-Free, Image #7740610