



COMMENT

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Our dùthchas is no longer 'ours' – it has become 'theirs'



A Northern gannet flies over Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth where thousands of the sea birds are gathering nest material as they prepare for the new breeding season, forming the largest single-island colony of gannets in the world..

By Alastair McIntosh

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I'M just back from two weeks home on the Isle of Lewis.

NatureScot, the [Scottish Government](#)'s natural heritage agency, was about to decide whether or not to license this year's "guga" hunt. For as long as history recalls, 10 men from Ness in the north of the island have voyaged some 40 miles out to sea to harvest young gannets from Sulasgeir, a rocky Atlantic outcrop.

This year has seen intense lobbying to ban the tradition. Foremost is Protect the Wild, an animal rights group based in London's Covent Garden.

The fortnight-long expedition usually takes 2000 birds a year. But over 2022-24, observing the impacts of bird flu, the hunters self-imposed a ban by desisting from applying for a licence.

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Last year, just 500 guga were licensed. This year, they'd hoped for at least the same again. But seemingly, NatureScot re-jigged their population models. Permission was refused. Whether this was purely down to science or to aggressive lobbying is an open question.

The bottom line was that the decision was taken out of the hands of island experts, and made by other experts as they say in the island, "from away".

Locals have been shocked by the vitriol. I was visiting an elderly family in Ness last week, and the lady of the house told me: "I am staying out of the guga debate as it has been terrible."

An old friend with conservative views messaged: "Here is the irony with their obsession with baby gannets. They will all be pro-choice on abortion."

One may or may not agree, but the logic's clear enough.

“I can testify at just how aghast we as a community and a wider island,” wrote Ness-born-and-bred Murdo MacRitchie in a newspaper comment. “The venom betrays a real hatred to an almost racist level.”

Similarly, last week’s Stornoway Gazette’s led with the comment: “As is the way with bullies, these people pick on weak targets against whom to stir up prejudice and hatred.”

Others in the community tell of threats of violence reported to the police, or comment wryly on this happening as their natural environment faces industrialisation from mega wind farms, extracting wealth for landowners, corporations and profligate consumerism mainly in the distant south.

This leaves many in the community with a sense of a theft of agency; a self-evident reality that “our” environment – our dùthchas as the [**Gaelic**](#) calls heritage in the land – is no longer “ours”, but is being progressively appropriated as “theirs”.

It compounds, as the Stornoway Gazette put it, “the cruel realities of depopulation and demographic change.” Driving a wedge between people and place, it begs the question: “Who will speak for the rights of people and communities?”

The annual queue of families waiting for their bird as the boat comes in from Sulasgeir testifies to both gourmet and cultural significance, not unlike the mainstream annual ritual of procuring the Christmas turkey. I was once served with one, back in the days. It tasted like a vintage hen, dried out over winter on the rafters of the byre and marinated in cod liver oil.

But to aficionados, it’s a delicacy; tiered against which are concerns fitting to any cull of both conservation and cruelty.

On conservation, the hunters’ three-year voluntary stop during the avian flu population collapse demonstrates environmental responsibility. But cruelty. With any animal consumption, there’s the rub.

NatureScot’s licensing requires the birds to be killed humanely, within the scope of the law, and nobody should claim otherwise. The young birds are lassoed on the ground, dispatched with a quick blow to the head, gutted and salted for consumption.

Some dispute the application of the term humane. But, unless we are vegans, how do we think that our meat, fish and eggs are produced?

Supermarket chickens are either gassed, or strung upside down by their legs on a moving shackle line, there to be dipped head first into electrified water for stunning prior to their throats being cut.

If we're vegetarians but eat eggs, what do we think happens to the 50% of male chickens? After sexing, they're either gassed or "macerated" – minced alive in a grinder.

An additional welfare concern is disturbance of the colony during snatching from the nest. It's a valid point, a reality of predation. But equally, if we eat sheep, the herd's lamentful bleats after lambs are taken off the ewes remind that one person's Sunday roast is another's guga.

Only strict veganism sanctions the moral high ground. But if veganism or at least vegetarianism is not our way, we must be honest. In the balance is not the principle of killing to eat, but rather, an equation that compares the disturbance and quick blow of the guga hunt with the stress and stun gun of the abattoir.

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Neither are tasteful. The majority of us are complicit with the latter. To borrow from Adrienne Rich's poem, *Hunger*: "Quantify suffering? My guilt at least is open, / I stand convicted by all my convictions – / you, too."

To liken the guga hunt to bull fighting, fox hunting or pheasant shooting is a false equivalence. The hunt is not for "sport". It "entertains" no spectators. What, then, renders it a matter of culture, tradition and heritage?

At the core lies a principle that thinkers on culture and development call "the implicit meaning of local practices". It's how, when you unpack embedded local customs, you'll often find far more than meets the eye, joined up like mycelia in implicit networks that sustain a community's social cohesion.

Like the body, communities too have immune systems that implicitly protect integrity.

For example, islanders of my generation remember the 1966 seamen's strike that ran for six weeks. Whereas country areas were OK, some townsfolk were hard-pressed for basic supplies. That memory stands us in good stead given that the isles today sit at the end of just-in-time global supply chains.

Being mindful of this at the time of Covid, crofters in Lewis talked among each other as to what they might fall back should food shortages have occurred. Had push come to shove, they would have summoned up traditional ecological knowledge. That's what such as the guga hunt embeds in the cultural immune system. It's an implicit meaning of a local practice.

Moreover, like other indigenous peoples, islanders worry at the impacts of modernity upon the young. As a time-served deck hand on the [CalMac](#) ferries put it to me last week: "They're not on the job, they're just on their phones, and don't have the same initiative."

A local writer Donald Murray tackles such disconnects in his book, *The Guga Hunters*. To him, the hunt binds the community "to both the place and practices of our ancestors."

Through its implicit meanings, "we are no longer the 'unrooted', disconnected people into which we have been transformed by progress and our modern consumer society." We're no longer good for nothing, except "shelf-space in our local Tesco or Co-op."

In contrast, a fortnight out on Sulasgeir "tests mind, body and spirit, and teaches the young men how to get on with men who are older and more experienced."

It's a rite of passage, a cultivation of future community leaders, that on Sulasgeir with its tobar, the well, and its Tigh Beannaichte or "blessing house" chapel, helps to render them "familiar with the glories of the natural world."

These points don't have to be male-gendered. Some of today's best crofters are women, and long have been so.

But I press again my main point: if we are not to be vegans, the guga hunt boils down to balances of degree and taste, and to underlying markers of belonging and identity.

Murray ends his book with a striking poem. He foresees a time at the Old Cemetery in Ness when the graves will open. The dead will rise and walk, and they will see what it is that we "have no longer held in safe-keeping".

They will find "that bog has choked both drain and furrow", and they will be astonished at such "weak and feckless offspring who let slip / rich legacies once granted by these shades".

The world changes, and perhaps in turn the guga hunt will, as lawyers say of old ways, "fall into desuetude".

But if it does, let it be the people of the place who primarily move that process. Let it be as new patterns are woven on the loom, ones not dispatched from Covent Garden, but of their own experience, imagination and love.

Dùthchas is the heritage of people hefted to their place. “NatureScot”, as Scottish Natural [Heritage](#), has backed some good work on it.

Their licensing decision was for this year only. May future process weave in to the natural ecology an ever-deepening understanding, also, of our human ecology.

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