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An ethnographic study of Scottish Gaelic language revitalisation and nature conservation in the Western Isles

Cormac Cleary
PhD Social Anthropology
University of Edinburgh
2023
Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Cormac Cleary
December 2023
Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of the tensions and confluences between the revitalisation of Scottish Gaelic and the conservation of nature in Uist, a region within the Western Isles. The islands are home to internationally important biodiversity as well as the densest population of Scottish Gaelic speakers remaining in the world. The thesis considers the question of how it comes to be that the conservation of nature and the revitalisation of Gaelic do not often work together effectively. Based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Uist, the study draws on participant observation and interviews with a wide variety of island residents, including fishers, crofters, artists, government employees, land managers, conservationists, and others, as well as social media and documentary analysis. The thesis itself juxtaposes problems of language politics and resource management under six classic anthropological themes which provide a framework for analysis: community, nature, writing, classifying, indigeneity, and prediction. Each of these themes creates a discursive space in which the worldbuilding practices of a variety of actors can be considered in relation to Gaelic and nature, while engaging with debates in environmental and linguistic anthropology. I argue that the mismatch between Gaelic and nature conservation has two major causes: the first is in the core concepts of environmental governance – nature and community – which have their roots in oppressive structures which have been damaging to island lifeways and do not match with islander experiences. The second is that nature conservation draws on epistemological traditions which exclude minority languages and other ways of knowing. Finally, the thesis demonstrates the ways in which similar discourses are utilised in both Gaelic and Nature conservation and considers their relative efficacy: it is argued that a politics of hopelessness ironically offers an example of a discursive symbiosis between the two.
Lay Summary

Biological diversity and linguistic diversity are under threat at a global level. Many of the places which host vital reservoirs of biodiversity are also home to endangered languages, and similarly many of the hazards faced by each form of diversity are shared. This thesis offers an ethnographic exploration of one such region that plays host to threatened biocultural diversity. Specifically, it examines the tensions and confluences between nature conservation and the revitalisation of Scottish Gaelic language and culture in the Western Isles. Scottish Gaelic is a minority language spoken by just over 1% of the population of Scotland, and has its highest density of speakers in the Western Isles. Here, Gaelic language and culture are tightly interwoven with practices of land management which have given rise to the unique ecologies of the islands. There is then an opportunity for collaboration between those who would save Gaelic and those who would protect the islands’ nonhuman inhabitants. However, the relationship between the two fields is in practice superficial at best, and at times verges on hostile. Why is this the case? How do islanders live in the shadow of frequent pronouncements of the imminent loss of the islands’ precious cultural and natural heritage, and how do different people work to save them?

This study is based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in South Uist and the surrounding islands between November 2019 and December 2021. It draws primarily on interviews, documentary and media analysis, and participant observation in a variety of settings, including nature reserves, crofts, fishing boats, and community life in the islands. To seek the answer to my central questions, the thesis is organised around six themes, each of which provides a space for juxtaposition between aspects of nature conservation and the politics of language revitalisation. I first dissect two key terms that are central to the governance of the islands and their heritage: nature and community. Following this, I explore the relationship between particular language practices – translating, classifying and writing – and the preservation of phenomena in the world. Finally, I evaluate two discursive strategies that are held in common between nature conservationists and Gaelic advocates: first, tropes around indigeneity and invasiveness, and second, predictions of imminent, catastrophic loss.
What emerges from these comparisons is that the failure to meaningfully integrate Gaelic revitalisation and nature conservation is due to a number of key factors. The key concepts underpinning the governmental protection of various aspects of cultural and natural heritage – nature and community – do not match with islanders’ experienced realities, and ultimately perpetuate the oppressive structures that threaten island lifeways in the first place. Moreover, nature conservation emerges from an epistemological tradition which fits uncomfortably with the language practices of Gaelic speakers and does not easily make space for Gaelic worldviews within its own modes of operation. Where similar strategies are adopted in cultural and natural protection, there is at times a stark difference in effectiveness. However one strategy that appears to provide hope for collaboration is, ironically, a discursive strategy of predictive hopelessness in the face of environmental change.
Acknowledgements

This thesis would never have been possible without the generosity and hospitality of my participants. You gave up your time and shared your thoughts, days, and tea with a stranger so that this document could come into being. I cannot express how grateful I am to you all, and I hope this thesis does justice to the authenticity and openness with which you greeted me.

Moving to the Western Isles with nothing but a handful of contacts was a daunting experience made easier by all the people I had the pleasure of coming to know outside a research capacity. I will be forever grateful to Chris and Fee for giving me a home when I first arrived and putting up with me during the 2020 lockdown, and to Gilbert and Margaret for sharing their croft with me for the second half of my fieldwork. Despite the weirdness of doing fieldwork in 2020, I look back fondly on my time in the islands, and that is thanks to all of the people who invited me to their homes and made me feel welcome in Uist. I am indebted to the good people at Ceòlas in particular for setting me up with a solid foundation and providing a space for my rusty Gaelic to get less rusty.

This thesis is heavily indebted to the support and mentorship of my outstanding supervisory team. Dr Magnus Course has been on this journey with me since 2017 when I was developing my initial admissions and funding applications, and has seen it through with insightful feedback and guidance throughout. Dr Sophia Woodman was an invaluable interlocutor in the pre-fieldwork stages of the project, and the research design and initial thinking owes much to thoughtful conversations with her. Dr Fraser Macdonald was a later addition to the team and has brought with him a wealth of expertise and editorial precision which have made writing up a rewarding and instructive experience.

As for my wonderful friends, family, and colleagues, there are too many of you to list: you know who you are, and you know that this could never have come to be without you. Finally, I am grateful to the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science for funding this project, which has transformed me.
List of Figures and Tables

Fig. 1: Map of the Western Isles 21
Fig. 2: Gaelic language speaker densities 32
Fig. 3: Map of nature conservation designations in Uist 33
Fig. 4. Untangling a storm petrel from the net and a makeshift field office for measuring and recording biometric data 116
Fig. 5. An Gearasdan memes 150
Fig. 6 – Poball Fhinn, a stone circle on North Uist. 195
Fig. 7: SISI Alien Detectives Scene of Crime Report worksheet 206
Fig. 8. Edwin Landseer’s *Monarch of the Glen* 208
Fig. 9: Graphic Predictive Model from *The Gaelic Crisis* 242
Fig. 10. Screenshot from Misneachd presentation: map with highlights on areas with strongest Gaelic communities 248
Fig. 11. Screenshots from Misneachd presentation: maps showing areas on Climate Central map that are most at risk of flooding 248

Tables

Table 1. Storm Petrel Data 117
List of Abbreviations

AECS: Agri-Environmental Climate Scheme
BNP: British National Party
BTO: British Trust for Ornithology
CnES: Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council)
IGRP: Islands Gaelic Research Project
MPA: Marine Protected Area
NBN: National Biodiversity Network
OHBR: Outer Hebrides Biological Recording
OHB: Outer Hebrides Birds
RSPB: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SAC: Special Area of Conservation
SISI: Scottish Invasive Species Initiative
SNH: Scottish Natural Heritage
SPA: Special Protected Area
SSSI: Site of Special Scientific Interest
SGRPID: Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate
# Contents

An ethnographic study of Scottish Gaelic language revitalisation and nature conservation in the Western Isles  

Declaration 1  
Abstract 2  
Lay Summary 3  
Acknowledgements 4  
List of Figures and Tables 7  
List of Abbreviations 8  
Contents 9  
Introduction 12  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paragraph</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slow Worms and Wildfires</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What am I talking about when I’m talking about Uist?</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Potted History of the Islands</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Real People in a Real Place”: Writing the Islands</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Island Problem: Landscapes of Gaelic and Nature Conservation</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preserving Gaelic: History and Ideology</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conserving Nature: Culture and Conflict</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideologies of Nature and Language</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “Community” of Study</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timelines and Covid-19</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents and Social Media</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaelic</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Outline</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Chapter One – “Empowerment and all those bloody words!”: Ontologies, Epistemologies, and the Trouble with Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: “We’re all on the same side.”</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theorising, Making, and Managing Communities</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Ontologies: Who or What is the Community?</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Epistemologies: What does the Community Know?</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Chapter Two – Farming Nature: Crofting Communities and Environmental Management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: What is the real product of the crofting system?</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agri-Environmental Schemes and the Protection of the Machair</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Naturecultures and the Potential of the Buyout</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Chapter Three - “The language that they think in their own heads”: Writing as Preservative Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: A Dark and Stormy Petrel Night</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing, Speaking, Texts</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaelic’s Literary Orality</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing and Loss, Writing to Preserve</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Writing Practices</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representing Reality Accurately</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contesting Reality</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Chapter Four - “Once my paper is out, there will be a difference”: Translating Taxonomies and Naming the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Columba Livia/Rock Dove/Pigeon/Calman Creige/Calman Mara/Smùdan</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming and Translating</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Survey of Gaelic Environmental Lexicography</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexicography in Practice 1: Three Texts</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexicography in Practice 2: Three Birds</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oystercatchers/Trilleachan/Gille-Brìghean/Bridean/Haematopus Ostralegus</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Slow Worms and Wildfires

I start with a failed expedition to find a legless lizard on a burnt hillside. It is a miserable, grey, damp day at the beginning of August, the height of summer on South Uist. I am climbing a hillside on the island’s southern edge, doused in midge repellent, trousers tucked into my socks and t-shirt tucked into my trousers, all potential gaps in my clothing plugged against invasion by Lyme-disease carrying ticks. I’m following Michael, a retiree who is not from the islands originally but speaks fluent Gaelic as he takes me to see where the slow worms used to live.

To the uninitiated, the slow worm sounds like an invertebrate soil-dweller and looks like a snake, but it is in fact a lizard, albeit a legless one. It is a protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and a priority species under the UK post-2010 biodiversity framework, although it is listed as a species of least concern vis-à-vis risk of extinction. Slow worms have been recorded roughly 20 times in as many years in the Western Isles, mostly in Lewis and Harris, some 150km to the North of where we’re hiking today. The southern slopes of South Uist are the only known sites in Uist to have hosted a population. I read about this in an article in the Hebridean Naturalist, a locally published natural history journal, on the subject of this population he tracked down, based on a photograph taken some decades ago of a local fisherman (then a child) holding up a slow worm caught one summer, and a dubious record of “small vipers” from an early 18th century source (Martin, 2003).

Today we don’t find any worms. In fact, Michael hasn’t seen a single worm this year, having been up the hill 20 times. In previous years, at both of the spots we check, he says he would see them “irregularly but often.” Not common by any means, Michael jokes that he has a “particular affinity with them”. He even built makeshift shelters for them at one of the two sites where they had been found, weighing down corrugated iron sheets with rocks – the idea being that the corrugated iron would warm up in the sunlight and create an attractive shelter for cold blooded slow worms. None have been found in his slow worm hotel. There are two possible reasons for this lack of worms – one is an unusually cold May, and the
other has to do with one of the more controversial forms of land management in the islands: muirburn or falaisgear. This is a practice of controlled moorland burning, intended to remove the top layer of heather overgrowth and allow new fresh shoots to grow – this is done to benefit game birds on shooting estates, and also for grazing animals on hillsides.

In the winter of 2021, a number of wildfires raged in the islands, likely to have been muirburns that got out of control. This sparked considerable public debate and became a common bone of contention between the islands’ crofting communities and those termed “incomers”, largely UK mainlanders – both Scottish and English – who have moved to the islands primarily for the beauty of their questionably natural landscapes. This latter group commonly refer to the muirburn, even when carried out according to the Scottish government’s Muirburn Code, as “ecological vandalism” or similarly freighted terms. On the other hand, crofters typically argue that the burn is a necessary practice and evoke the language of tradition to justify the practice – “we have always done this.”

When talking about ecological vandalism or ecological grief in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, the first thing that has to be said is that the region’s ecosystems are already in a state of severe degradation. There is a tendency in mainstream Scottish representations to look at these landscapes through a Romantic aesthetic lens – to those unaware of the region’s history, what we appear to see is an unpopulated wilderness, an untouched wild place. This representation has historically been central to naturalising the British nation, and the place of this mythologised Highlands and Islands within Romantic nationalist iconography as an empty area available for exploration and exploitation (Wyld, 2011; Prior, 1995). What we see is in fact a depopulated landscape, one that is better described in Tsing’s (2015) terms as a capitalist ruin or a blasted landscape. The Highlands and Islands were subject to sometimes quite brutal efforts at clearance of the land during the 18th and 19th centuries as traditional clan leadership structures collapsed and highland estates were reorganised towards the generation of profit through industry (Hunter, 2018). In Uist, these industries included manufacture of alkali from seaweed, and sheep farming. The cultural landscape of the islands, including its heather moorland supressed by burning, are not exemplary of primordial Celtic indigenous land management, just in the same way that they are not untouched natural wildernesses. Muirburn may be modern but it is experienced as
traditional practice of Gaelic speaking crofting communities and gives a sense of continuity with the past. Nonetheless, crofters I spoke to are adamant that the practice is integral to their land management practices, and it has a place within the continuation of community-level environmental management in the islands. In its ideal form, it is carried out by a community, with many on hand to make sure the fire is contained and controlled.

However, as Michael points out, the way that it is done now is not traditional in the sense of communal labour:

It has a place in moor maintenance. But, that's controlled burning, when there are enough people to control it before it gets out of hand. When it gets out of hand, when it becomes a wildfire, instead of just burning the top layer of heather off and allowing the new growth to come. But this is environmentally a totally different case that happens in South Uist, because if there's a wind, and it gets out of control, as it inevitably does, because it's usually lit by just one person with a match, it gets into the peat and it just gets so hot that it sweeps across the hillside. it burns everything, and it sterilises everything. and it's got no real useful function. It came all the way to Ludag, and this was all black, although it's recovering a bit now. There must have been a southwest wind, or a westerly wind, and that smoke is going to come over here. You know that for any creature that's going to promote a flight mode to get out of that area. They don't need - it doesn't have to be a burning fire. You know how they control bees with smoke, it's the same phenomenon. I don't know what's happened here, but it's really sad. It's very difficult, this suits them, they've got all the cover they need in the summer, and in the winter, they can get in under these rocks here, in the holes, little crannies and crevices to hibernate. And it's south facing - I mean the sun's not out today so its going to catch every ray of sun going, although there hasn't been that much this year apart from that one period. My feeling is they don't occupy this site anymore.

I am interested in how the slow worm becomes a figure of convergence between two forms of loss embodied in the island landscape. This version of the falaisgear practice enables the fires to get out of control, to become wildfires, and possibly to wipe out a colony of
protected lizards, a rarity in that latitude that have managed to survive against the odds in an a very anti-reptilian climate. Embedded in this is both the sense of loss felt by those who appreciate these hardy creatures and their unusual forms of life at the margins of their habitable range, and the sense of loss felt by communities who strive to maintain traditional forms of land management in the face of rural depopulation. Previously, there would have been plenty able-bodied crofters available to help control the fire, but now it’s just “one person with a match.”

The already-blasted landscape, scarred as it is by cultural and linguistic clearance and agro-ecological damage, becomes much more so in the wake of these uncontrolled burns. Large swathes of the islands’ hillsides burned in that winter, and they had not recovered by the end of the summer, still showing large black patches with very limited growth. But what then is at stake here? For crofters, continuing practices perceived as going back to time immemorial serves two purposes for resistance against the economic, political, and cultural forces that threaten the continuity of Gaelic crofting lifeways. First, they represent an effort to keep up management in the face of rural depopulation driven by centuries of regional neglect and out-migration. Secondly, they offer a point of resistance against forms of conservation rhetoric which are prevalent among incomers to the islands. This kind of rhetoric is widely felt to be an external oppressive force, and sometimes the more prescriptive sides of conservation are compared with the historical clearances, denying the self-determination of islanders over the ways in which their land is used. It reinscribes these hillsides as wild and unpopulated, rather than depopulated. Through burns, the land is recreated as peopled, as interfered with, as not-natural, and as marked by human practice. It is resisted as untouched, as wilderness.

On the other hand, what of the political action of people like Michael, enthusiasts of the natural world? First, many attend public consultations, write complaints, etc., and their voices are loudly heard in any public forum about the evils of muirburn. Other than that, Michael’s repeated visits to the slow worm habitat are a form of documentation which have indirect political impacts. He belongs to a group of biological recorders, who spend vast amounts of time out in various island habitats, studiously recording the abundance of various species, depending on their personal interest. This group and its members tend to
think of themselves as apolitical, but almost all of them think of their work as important for establishing a biodiversity baseline in anticipation of the loss of species. It is therefore born out of a sense of anticipatory grief for the natural world and has two functions. One is, on a hopeful level, to influence policy and perhaps gain protection for the organisms that are recorded as occupying a particular space. The other is less hopeful, and rests on the need to provide a record of things that will likely soon be lost.

So when Michael and I go on his 21st failed trip of the summer to find these rare lizards, I bear witness to the loss of a favoured walking companion, an unusual population. His sadness at their disappearance is palpable, as is his annoyance at the uncontrolled burning of the hillside. But we must also recognise that this ecological loss is a knock-on effect of crofters who resist the extinction of their own lifeways – the charred, lizardless hillside bears witness to these two losses together. With healthy communities, fires remain in control, and lizards remain established while weakening human communities lead to their endangerment and loss.

We can see in the displaced slow worm’s story the complex and often ambivalent ways in which nature and culture on the islands are intertwined. The highly valued ecosystems of the hilly moorland are themselves degraded capitalist ruins. The land management practices which have produced and maintained them, Muirburn among them, are shifting under the pressure of rural depopulation, which destabilises the ecological balance of the degraded landscape. Those who seek to protect “nature” here are seeking to protect a particular form of unnatural balance. Those who seek to maintain environmental practices associated with Gaelic culture are accused of acting against nature. However, it is clear that nature and culture here are not easily untangled. Clearly, the nonhuman environment and human communities are bound up in similar struggles – those seeking to protect one, then, might be expected to work in tandem with those seeking to protect the other. However this is rarely the case, or when there is cooperation it is often relatively superficial. Why? This is the central question that I seek to answer in this thesis. Or, as Carpenter (2020) argues, the ethnographic is more suited to answering the question of how Gaelic and nature come to fit together uncomfortably.
How is it that two phenomena, or sets of phenomena, each intertwined with the other and each recognised to be vital to the health of the community, do not seem to work together as one might expect? What are points of friction between the two, and what are the points at which they seem confluent, that might point us in the direction of a more equitable relationship? In each chapter, I examine a different facet of this question in relation both to the preservation of Gaelic and nature in the islands. On one level, then, this thesis is about the politics of language and nature. However we might also fold this statement in on itself and permutate it in any number of ways to say that it is about the nature of language, as well as the language of nature. Or indeed the politics of the nature of language, the nature of the politics of language, the language of the politics of nature, the politics of the language of nature, or the language of the nature of politics.

The argument of the thesis as a whole is that:

1. Theoretically, Gaelic revitalisation and nature conservation should work well together because:
   i. Their objects to be protected are both arguably threatened by the same things, namely climate change, capitalism, etc.
   ii. Places of human activity which sustain the unique natures of the islands also sustain Gaelic.
   iii. Following from i. and ii., addressing root causes and solutions of one issue holistically involves addressing those of the other.

2. However, Gaelic revitalisation and nature conservation do not work well together in practice, because:
   i. The modes of governance involved in these two things do not fit with realities on the ground, and emerge from oppressive structures that do not address the underlying integrated causes of cultural and natural degradation:
      a. Communities: community governance rests on faulty ideals of what the community is, and this is alienating to the Gaelic speaking cohort in particular (Ch. 1)
b. Natures: nature is afforded a privileged position over other endangered entities, namely Gaelic language and culture (Ch. 2)

ii. There are problems of the role of language and differing epistemologies in each of these spheres:
   a. Nature conservation has a strong and relatively uncomplicated relationship with the written word as a mode of preservation. Gaelic does not share this, having a difficult history with writing and limited literate capacity among the speaker community. The textual is an important mode of state engagement and Gaelic lacks this. It thus does not speak the language of the state in the way that nature conservation does (Ch.3).
   b. Nature conservation relies heavily on categorisation of the world into taxonomies and the species concept. A dive into this reveals that there is a hierarchy of language when it comes to its usefulness for representing the world accurately, and Gaelic is at the bottom of this hierarchy (Ch.4).

3. There are some strategies used for protection in both spheres which have varying effects:
   a. One of these is the idea of indigeneity and nativeness, which is highly effective in nature conservation to some extent, but a weak argument culturally because of its problematic resonances. In nature, it also falls flat at times which emphasise the separateness of the islands from the nation, which form a mirror image to its lack of efficacy in the cultural sphere. It is a space of shared language but differing efficacy.
   b. One is predictions of doom, which provide a useful framework for inspiring action, have a long history within both Gaelic and environmental activism, and represent a space in which two forms of activism increasingly work well together. This is a space of shared language which has proven fertile ground for collaboration.

4. Ironically, then, in protecting the islands and their natural and cultural heritage, strategically deployed hopelessness provides the basis for hope.

The thesis contributes to anthropological discussions of nature conservation conflict and linguistic performativity, as well an anthropology of Scotland, examining the place of the
islands and their natural and cultural resources within the future of the country. Part of the project here is to explore the multiplicity of Scotland: as Yates-Doerr and Mol (2012) argue, anthropology has had a history of contrasting the peculiarities of the “other” against the backdrop of a unified, scientific “West” – this backdrop is far from self-evident. Examining the circulation of monolithic scientific discourses through the lens of a minority language brings this multiplicity into sharper focus. If one of my major concerns is about how linguistic practices bring worlds into being, then an insistence on attention to a minoritised language forces us to see how this operates differently depending on what language we are talking about. Speakers of different languages might well have differing linguistic ideologies or understandings about the power of words. A similar rationale informs Sharon Macdonald’s ethnography of Gaelic revival in Skye, just a short ferry away from North Uist: to see the islands as internal to modernity, which is “more heterogenous and more characterised by tensions and ambivalences than it is sometimes depicted as being” (1997, 4). It is in examining the structures behind the construction and maintenance of modern Scotland, and the different ways that they are taken up by and impact diverse communities, that we can begin to understand the mismatch between Gaelic revitalisation and nature conservation, as well as glimpses of spaces where the two work in tandem. The management of nature in Scotland is particularly fraught, as places such as the islands which are valued for their biodiversity are those with the most violent histories of dispossession. They are thus also particularly valued for their place within the historical self-understanding of the Gaelic speaking community, which has a sense of dispossession at its core: as such questions about the management of land in Gaelic heartlands are particularly laden with emotion. This makes a Gaelic-speaking region such as Uist a particularly productive site to examine conservation-culture conflict.
What am I talking about when I’m talking about Uist?

The region to which I refer as Uist forms a part of the Western Isles, which is an archipelago off the northwest coast of Scotland. The area comprising Uist and Barra has a population of just under 6,000, which has remained relatively stable for the past twenty years (Scottish Government, 2023). However, the population is rapidly ageing: though the population has remained relatively stable statistically, the overall trend is of young people leaving and retirees moving to the islands, sparking fears of an imminent drop in population and the unsustainability of core social services (NSH Western Isles, 2023). Unemployment levels are below-average for the UK as a whole and the business start-up rate is above the Scottish
average. Industry is primarily focused primarily on fishing, tourism, aquaculture, textiles, agriculture, construction, and public services (OHIGF 2012). However the islands in particular are vulnerable to policy environments due to the “over-representation” of public sector employment (Armstrong et al 2015, 1573).

The Western Isles themselves have many names, both in English and Gaelic, each of which resonate with particular aspects of the islands and how they are imagined. In English they are also commonly referred to as the Outer Hebrides, a name which emphasises its remoteness. This version of the name is used idiomatically to refer to a place which is very far away. In Gaelic the Western Isles are referred to as Innse Gall, as in the name of a local housing organisation named Tàighean Innse Gall (Western Isles Houses). This name translates as “islands of the foreigners”, a moniker which references the connections between the islands and Norse settlers who arrived towards the end of the first millennium A.D. and remained in power until the 1200s. Indeed many of the place names in the Western Isles are of Norse origin – among these Uist, Frobost, Hecla. The Norse origins of many island place names were frequently cited in discussions I had with residents of the islands, and for many are a core part of self-understanding of Islanders as being connected with the wider North Atlantic world, having a sort of cosmopolitanism built in from the roots. This point also appears frequently in conversations with individuals critical of the idea of the Gaels as an ancient Celtic race. Another commonly used name for the islands in Gaelic is an t-Eilean Fada – “the Long Island”. This refers to the length of the archipelago from the butt of Lewis down to Barra, and implies certain unity between the islands, cast in this name as a single island.

It would, however, be a mistake to think of the Western Isles as a single island or unit. While the Western Isles is a council area (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar) and thus represents a singular entity in terms of governance, this a relatively recent occurrence: until 1975 Lewis was part of the Ross and Cromarty Area and the islands from Harris in the North to Vatersay in the South belonged to Inverness-shire. Each island has its own distinct accent and character (not to mention the internal variation within each island), and the residents generally dislike being bunched together as a homogenous category. For the purposes of my research, “Uist” refers to all of the islands between Berneray in the north and Eriskay in the south. I exclude
Lewis and Harris to the north of Berneray, and Barra to the south of Eriskay. The somewhat arbitrary delineation of the scope of the study is a function of infrastructure: it is possible to drive from Berneray to Eriskay along causeways that connect these islands, while Barra, Harris, and Lewis are accessible only by ferry. Because of this infrastructural linkage, Uist forms an administrative unit in fields such as education, sharing one high school, and as a result is increasingly culturally cohesive as a region, distinct from its northern and southern neighbours. From the perspective of the fieldworker, it also meant that these were the places which were easily accessible to me, and the fact that they shared infrastructural arrangements and form, to some extent, a bounded social unit, meant that a restricted focus to one or other of the islands felt arbitrary.

This has not always been the case: in Martin Martin’s 1703 account of the islands, North Uist and Berneray are included in the section that describes Harris, while Barra is included in a section with Benbecula, South Uist, and Eriskay. Indeed the causeway that links Berneray with North Uist was built only this century, the Gaelic name for the island is Beàrnaraigh na Hearadh (meaning Berneray of Harris), and the island forms part of the Bays of Harris estate. As such until the recent addition of the causeway, Berneray could have been considered more affiliated with Harris than with Uist, and with the increasing likelihood of a community buyout of that estate, this connection looks unlikely to be severed.

Furthermore, certain aspects of island life will apply more to some islands and less than or not at all to others: for example, the South Uist Estate, comprising Eriskay, South Uist, and parts of Benbecula, is community owned, while most of North Uist estate remains in private ownership by a trust thought to be controlled by the Earl of Granville, while the Scottish Government is the landlord of some pockets of the island and as mentioned Berneray forms part of the Bays of Harris Estate, which is privately owned at the time of writing. There are also broad-strokes demographic differences among the islands: religion is a good example of this, as North Uist is primarily Protestant while South Uist is primarily Catholic. Despite the infrastructural connection of the islands, many people are still unlikely to travel extensively up and down between islands. A common occurrence for me during my fieldwork would be a day in which I had arranged to meet someone in Eriskay and then immediately drive to see somebody else in Lochmaddy at the northern end of North Uist. This, for many of my interlocutors (particularly older people), was a baffling thing to do, as many still stick to their
home islands and very rarely make visits to neighbouring ones, which still represent something of a foreign country.

A Potted History of the Islands

Before I continue, I provide a brief sketch of the Western Isles and how they relate to the rest of the nation. This is useful background information, but also helps to illustrate the fallacy of three common myths about the islands: that they are peripheral and isolated from the rest of the world, that their "traditional" land use patterns are representative of pre-modern agriculture, and that they are in general traditional backwaters that lag behind the rest of the nation. The history of the islands, as proposed by Pearson et al. (2004) has been defined by five periods of external intrusions. Each of these has left marks on the landscape, both monumental and ecological, which are still visible today. The first settlers arrived in roughly 6000 B.C., with a further wave of Neolithic farmers in 4000 B.C. Following this, the arrival of the Beaker people (so named for their distinctive style of pottery) is the next significant addition in roughly 1100 B.C. The Norse arrived in the 9th century in the next major transformation, which was characterised by high levels of assimilation and cultural hybridity. As mentioned at the beginning of this section this has left a significant cultural legacy in the islands, though notably less so than Scotland’s other major archipelagos, Orkney and Shetland. The fifth and final period of intrusion “is the one that we are still living through” (ibid., 2004: 192).

When considering the history of the islands in relation to the rest of Scotland, it is important to dwell a moment on peripherality. In today’s world, the islands find themselves in a geographically marginal position, both in relation to the Scottish nation and the United Kingdom as a whole. However, in the “great ‘sea roads’ of the Scandinavian world”, the Western Isles were in a central position and characterised not by separation but by high levels of interconnection and exchange with other regions (ibid., 190). During this time, mainland Scotland’s aristocracy was Gaelic speaking, although this situation altered radically following the Norman invasion of Britain. Following the reunification of the islands with the Scottish kingdom in the 13th century, the islands and their native aristocracies began to
amass significant power, both economic and military. This period was defined by the Lordship of the Isles, which, while ostensibly a part of Scotland, created in effect a miniature Gaelic kingdom-within-a-kingdom, and a golden age for Gaelic language and culture. Following James IV's forfeiture of this title in 1493, there was a decline in the power of the region, culminating with the period referred to in Gaelic historiography as Linn nan Creach, the "era of plundering" (Newton, 2019). It is around this time that the highland-lowland divide begins to sharpen, as seen in the writings of the 15th-century historian John of Fordun:

"The highlanders and people of the islands, on the other hand, are a wild and untamed race, primitive and proud, given to plunder and the easy life, clever and quick to learn, handsome in appearance, though slovenly in dress, consistently hostile to the people and language of the English, and, when the speech is different, even to their own nation”

(MacLeod and Newton, 2019: 23).

Around the turn of the 17th century, the now-unified British crown sought to incorporate the clan chiefs into the British mainstream aristocracy, and did so in 1609 with reforms known as the Statutes of Iona. This was an agreement signed by the major highland clan chiefs who were at the time being held captive. It comprised a number of agreements aimed at cultural assimilation, including stipulations such as that highland lords would henceforth educate their children in England (Newton 2019). Following this, the power of the independent highland chiefs continued to wane until the point which is considered one of the most significant turning points in the history of the region: the Battle of Culloden in 1746. This was a decisive military defeat of the last Jacobite rebellion, which many highland clans supported. What followed was a violent suppression of Gaelic political power and culture, as well as the definitive incorporation of the highlands and islands into the broader economic, political, and cultural machine of the United Kingdom (Hunter 2018). Following the defeat, Charles Edward Stuart, known more widely in the region as Bonnie Prince Charlie, the pretender to the British throne who was behind the rebellion, fled to the islands where he hid for some time. One of my interlocutors was adamant that the political repercussions of this are still felt in the islands’ marginality:
You don't understand: it's history. Where did Bonnie Prince Charlie land, and where did he hide? We've never been forgiven. The evidence can be found if you look at public spending. When we were under Inverness-shire county council and now under the Western Isles council: where the money was spent and where it wasn't spent. It’s crystal clear! That's Scotland's shame and it still hasn't been dealt with.

The period following Culloden resulted in the total reorientation of highland landscapes toward industrial production and the creation of the crofting system. This sparks the fifth era of intrusion listed by Pearson et al. (2004), which they argue is still ongoing. In the period known as the Highland Clearances, vast swaths of land in the region were “cleared” of their existing populations to make way for large scale sheep production or for hunting estates. Those who were cleared were either sent to the New World or resettled in crofts. The crofting system operates according to principles of tenancy and commons: an individual crofter has access to both their own patch of land on which they can grow crops and raise animals, as well as to a common grazing area, usually on a hillside or in the islands on the machair1 if the township in question is on the west coast. The system was not created with agricultural efficiency in mind, but “as a means of disposing of a displaced population (the population removed from inland parts of the Highlands and Islands to make way for sheep farmers) and satisfying an urgent demand for labour” (Hunter, 2018: 283). Estates were financially dependent both on rent for crofts and on income from their production of raw materials for industry, and thus required a workforce that could nearly subsist on its own agricultural labour but would also require cash income. As Ennew (1980) and many other commentators have pointed out, then, patterns of land tenure in the islands must be understood not as pre-modern remnants that persist at the fringes of a capitalist nation, but as produced by, and indeed productive of, British modernity.

The clearances were often carried out by landlords who either had been successfully integrated into the British mainstream and as such had little emotional connection to their estates, or by wealthy industrialists who had purchased the estates from bankrupt landlords.

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1 A form of coastal grassland unique to the islands and some parts of the west coast of Ireland and the Scottish mainland.
who had not flourished in the new political status quo. In South Uist, the clearances were particularly violent, carried out by one of the latter class, whose primary aim was the extraction of profits from their new investments, and needed to remove “a population of poor people who did not fit into their financial plans” (Stewart, 1998: 21). This led to a major restructuring of Uist lifeways in the removal of most of the population, but also through modified labour patterns. In the islands, a major income source for estates, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars, was the kelp industry – kelp is still a big industry in the islands as it can be processed to produce a variety of useful chemicals. This caused a halt to the seasonal migration patterns in which women and children would move to high grazing or shieling grounds for the summer months with cattle to live in temporary camps: this was no longer possible with the need to be down at the coast to produce seaweed products (Symonds, 2011: 114). The empty hills of the region, then, much beloved within the romantic aesthetics of Scottish national iconography, are “saddening and depressing” to the “Highland mind” (Hunter, 2014: 275).

Relations between landowners and the general population of the islands continued in this oppressive mode for many years in a way that is remarkable among European countries. As Andy Wightman observes, “research has yet to reveal any country with a pattern of private landownership so concentrated as in Scotland” (2015: 111). In the late 19th century, movements for land reform began to arise across the country, and continued with limited success and some violent escalation for many years, before culminating in the Land Settlement Act 1919, which granted smallholdings to World War I veterans, and the Agricultural Holdings Act 1949, which gave security of tenure to crofters (making eviction effectively impossible). Since then, the islands have been the targets of a variety of development interventions, designed to tackle problems of depopulation and economic stagnation (Burnett, 2011). More recently, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gives crofting communities the right to buy the estates on which they live and work and hold the estates in trust among them. As noted above, some of the land within the study region are in community trust while some is still privately owned. The implications of community ownership and land management will be discussed in chapter one, but for now this leads us to the third important point to understand about island histories – the first two being that the islands’ construction as “peripheries” is unstable, and that land tenure there is distinctly
modern in character – namely that the islands now find themselves very much at the forefront of movements to redefine the future of landownership in Scotland, and not as backward or forgotten spaces lagging behind the rest of the nation. On the subject of these conventions of island representations, I now turn to a brief discussion of the ways in which the islands are often written.

“Real People in a Real Place”: Writing the Islands

“To grow up on an island is to grow up in a special world. Many of the books that I have read on the Hebrides, however, make this world appear Edenic and unreal: others suggest that the islander is a child who appears lost in the ‘real world,’ and even invent for him a language that was never spoken by anyone. It is easy to assign the islander to this misty, rather beautiful world, and leave him there if one first of all succeeds in making that world unreal, and its inhabitants unreal, off the edge of things, a noble savage with his stories and his unmaterialistic concerns. After all, is he not a Celt and are the Celts not meant to be rather vague, impractical, poetical, not at all like ‘us’ who succeed in both admiring and patronising the natives, simultaneously accepting that it would be nice to be poetic (and after all the islanders are nice) and also believing that such niceness is not after all suitable to the world in which we live...These books do not take the islander seriously as a real person in a real place.”

(Crichton Smith, 1986: 14)

Before I delve into the various ways in which the islands have been committed to text, I have quoted Iain Crichton Smith, Lewis-born bilingual poet and writer, at length. Here Crichton Smith expresses succinctly the ways in which the islanders have tended to be represented in writing – islanders are noble savages who live on misty isles that are curiously outside of the modern world and have an unreal, mythical quality. What follows is not an exhaustive account of all written works about Uist but an indicative overview of the tropes and trends in island writing over the past few centuries.
One early account of the islands is by Skye native Martin Martin, who wrote *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* 1703 following fieldwork around the Western Isles and is one of the primary sources through which the islands came to be objects of interest to outsiders. In the preface he notes that early geographers knew so little of the Isles “that they neither agreed in their name and number” and at that point they had “never been described till now by any man that was a native of the country, or had travelled them” (Martin, 2003: 3). He points out that although “the inhabitants of these islands do for the most part labour under the want of knowledge of letters...they seem to be better versed in the book of nature” and that “the curious by their observations might daily make further advances in the history of nature,” to which “women and illiterate persons have in some measure contributed” already (ibid.: 4-5). In the introduction then we see that writing on the islands is done in such a way as to ascertain some useful environmental knowledge from islanders. In general, the text of this work is unromantic and documents in a somewhat haphazard fashion many details of the natural environment and lifeways of the islanders.

Much literature about the islands covers its archaeology and natural history, often including Gaelic place names or other aspects of Gaelic culture e.g. Beveridge (2001) on archaeology or Campbell (1991) on lexicography. In addition to this, a major corpus of works falls under the category of folkloristics, operating under what MacDonald (2011) has termed the “salvage paradigm”, which operated along the premise that soon-to-disappear folklore, folksongs, and knowledge needed to be recorded. A fuller discussion of the issues surrounding the salvage paradigm will emerge in the course of this thesis. Many of the people collecting and recording such stories were amateurs who worked in some capacity for the state, for example Alexander Carmichael who collected his material while travelling for work as a Customs and Excise officer for the crown in the 19th century, or the church, such as Rev. Fr. Allan MacDonald. In the twentieth century there were also a number of professional collectors, often based either at University College Dublin or the University of Edinburgh’s School of Scottish Studies, which was founded in 1951 by Calum Maclean, the brother of noted Gaelic poet Sorley Maclean.

In 1908 Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, musician and collector of folk songs, wrote *Songs of the Hebrides*, which she dedicated to the women of the island. This work is more inflected with
a romantic mindset, describing the islanders as “an ancient race”, guardians of a tradition which “it would be wise to collect zealously...that we may save what is fast dying out”. The remoteness of the islands and genre of discovery have strong presences here, as for example when Kennedy-Fraser first sets foot on Eriskay, which she describes as “unspotted from the world”, onto what “seemed virgin rock, for scrambling up its perfectly pure white shellfish clad surface, no sign of pathway nor print of foot was to be seen”. Describing the island as a “rock, with a little sandy soil in its hollows and a peat bog in one part”, she connects the landscape with the culture, stating “it is is curious fact that the strongholds of the Celts are generally found amid such surroundings” (Kennedy Fraser, 1908: xvi-xvii). It should be noted that such representations of the islands as curious and antique lands are not only produced by outsiders – the Gaelic editor’s Foreword to Kennedy-Fraser’s work, written by Kenneth Macleod from Eigg, is itself replete with romanticisms.

Following in the footsteps of Kennedy-Fraser, was Margaret Fay Shaw, whose 1955 work, *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* was based on fieldwork undertaken between 1929 and 1935. An American by birth and later resident of the island of Canna, Shaw’s husband, John Lorne Campbell was also a noted folklore collector in the islands, as well as a landowner. Shaw’s account of island life is considerably less flowery. It is attentive to the considerable struggles of island livelihoods and the resilience of the people and their culture. Rather than casting herself as a last line of defence against the disappearance of the material she collects, she notes that “in spite of all the pressure exerted by English-language schools and broad-casting, and the influx of strangers during the war years, South Uist still retains in greater measure than any other part of the Highlands and Islands the great traditions of its Gaelic past” (Shaw, 1999: 17). There is a whisper here of the ancient Celtic past, but also a recognition of the considerable pressure put on Gaelic culture and the resistance of the people to that pressure: these are not quaint vestiges of a dying culture but actors who withstand external pressure.

Conversely, ethnographic studies have been at pains to emphasise that contemporary island society must not be viewed as residual of some prior Celtic era: rather “the Islands must be regarded as situated within the historical context of the development and operation of Western capitalism” and modernity (Ennew, 1980, 7; MacDonald, 1997; Parman, 2005).
Ennew, in her Lewis-based ethnography, argues that “the Hebridean self-image is built on a myth of past coherence” such that the “traditional Hebridean or crofting way of life can be argued to be an academic construction”. This myth, however, forms a “vital social function. Paradise can be regained as well as lost”: thus a nostalgia for a golden past can and has been utilised to “justify both State policy and Hebridean activity” (ibid.: 110-111). Most ethnographic works on the islands have however been based on studies in Lewis, Harris, Skye, and other surrounding islands.

The Highlands and Islands have long been considered problematic in various ways from the point of view of centralised government, and this concern has given rise to its fair share of representations. For example, in 1944, the Development Commission assigned Frank Fraser Darling to carry out the *West Highland Survey* (1955), which is a broad socio-ecological description of the region. It sets up its task as being to explore the “Highland problem”, which is referenced multiple times but never clearly defined, leading one to assume that the problem from this perspective is the Highlands themselves. The problem relates to what would now likely be referred to in the language of the “wicked problem” (Rittel and Webber, 1973) or the “superwicked problem” (Levin et al., 2012) referring to a problem or set of problems in social policy with seemingly impossibly complex causes and unclear pathways towards solution. The set of problems referred to under the “Highland problem” vary from context to context, but tend to include issues emerging from resource inequalities and management, including habitat degradation, food insecurity, depopulation, Gaelic language decline, and a variety of social issues.

There are remarkably few contemporary ethnographic accounts published on Uist as a region, notable exceptions being Magnus Course’s studies of the connections between Gaelic and fishing (Course and MacMillan, 2021) and of houses and memory in South Uist (Course 2018). Emily McEwan-Fujita’s ethnographic work on Gaelic is another example of such studies in the islands – see McEwan-Fujita (2010a) for a resumé of ethnographic sociolinguistic work on Gaelic up until 2010, which focused primarily on processes of language shift and on revitalisation, often focused on education. At the time she called for more work on the “actual proficiencies, usage patterns and ideologies of Gaelic speakers in residential community contexts” (2010a, 201). In other contemporary disciplines, the
islands have a tendency to appear in research on conservation conflict (Billing et al. 2017) and community land management (Creamer et al. 2018), following the footsteps of Frank Fraser Darling in puzzling over the ways in which the islands might be more effectively governed. This in-depth study based in South Uist and the surrounding islands is my contribution to this body of work, providing an ethnographic sensitivity to the textures of life amid the superwicked problems of governance. I hope to avoid the pitfalls of the various kinds of scholarly representations of the islands – the romanticism of the folklorists, the tendency of policy-oriented research to see the islands as problems to be solved – in short, to represent islanders as “real people in a real place”.

The Island Problem: Landscapes of Gaelic and Nature Conservation

At this point it is worth delving a little deeper into problems of Gaelic language revitalisation and the terrain of nature conservation in the islands and in Scotland more broadly. As mentioned in the potted history of the islands, it would be a mistake to think of the islands as isolated or peripheral. In fact, as home to some of the most important biodiversity in Scotland, some of the areas most vulnerable to climate change, and the highest density of Scottish Gaelic speakers in the world, Uist finds itself at the centre of debates around the natural and cultural futures of Scotland. The below maps help to visualise the extent of the islands’ importance in the conservation of Gaelic and the natural environment. The Gaelic map has South Uist marked as the island with the highest density of speakers within the region. The map of designations gives a sense of the ways in which people live their lives on multiple intersecting spaces of conservation importance. The reader will notice that most of these sites are clustered on the west coast, and an important insight is that this is also where habitation is densest. The most fertile land is on the west coast, and so there are very few settlements on the east coast – many of the white spaces on the designation are peatlands that are unsuitable for cultivation and as such are comparatively very sparsely settled. In this section I lay out the landscapes of Gaelic revitalisation and nature conservation in the islands. I first trace what is at stake in each field of preservation and then lay out my overall approach to the study in synthesis: how to study the entangled endangerments of cultural and natural heritage?
Fig. 2: Gaelic language speaker densities (National Records of Scotland, 2015: 84)
Fig. 3: Map of nature conservation designations in Uist

(Scotland’s Environment, 2023)
Preserving Gaelic: history and ideology

The last available census data on Gaelic speakers is from 2011. It enumerates 87,100 people with some Gaelic language skills in Scotland (1.7% of the population). Of these, 57,600 reported being able to speak, while the remainder could understand, read, or write it but not speak it. The majority of this latter group could understand spoken Gaelic but not read or write it, while a smaller minority could read or write, but not speak or understand it. The 2011 figures show a 5.7% decline in speakers compared with 2001, although this varies across age group and location: speakers under the age of 25, for instance increased by 8.6%. The highest numbers of Gaelic speakers by age are above the age of 35, but more than 50% of speakers above the age of 50 (National Records of Scotland, 2015).

Gaelic occupies a contradictory space in public life in Scotland. It is common to hear outcry about the use of Gaelic on public property such as ambulances or road signs, with a common (incorrect) pronouncement in the Lowlands that “Gaelic was never spoken here”. In Dunmore’s recent study, a questionnaire came up with a majority of people (45.5%) agreeing that Gaelic is a “dying language”, but an even greater majority (70%) agreeing that “Gaelic is useful for job opportunities” (2019, 138). That the language can be both dying and economically valuable is a curious state of affairs. Indeed many commentators have pointed out that the status of Gaelic is increasingly paradoxical in this sense. MacLeod (2020) points to a lack of “critical mass” as one key factor in the continued decline of the language: that is, policymakers and governments have rarely felt under quite enough pressure to act sufficiently in favour of genuine revitalisation. This lack of critical mass was in turn, for MacLeod driven by an ethic of assimilationism among the Gaelic community and a failure to attract the non-Gaelic speaking population of Scotland to engaging meaningfully with the language. Nonetheless, as he concludes, while Gaelic’s increased profile in the public sphere has accompanied its continued contraction, the growth of institutionalised Gaelic since the 1970s has undeniably stemmed the tide somewhat and maintained Gaelic speakers at higher levels than if such growth had not occurred.

MacLeod notes that to a “surprising extent, arguments about the appropriate place of Gaelic in modern Scotland often draw upon understandings (or misunderstandings) of its
place in centuries past” (2020: 1). It is therefore worth stepping back in time briefly to offer a sketch of the historical development of the language. Scottish Gaelic (hereafter referred to simply as Gaelic) is a Celtic language of the Goidelic or Q-Celtic branch, along with Irish Gaelic and Manx. The P-Celtic branch, comprising Welsh, Cornish and Breton, is thought to have been long established in Great Britain from around 500 B.C., with Q-Celtic speakers coming from Ireland and establishing themselves in Scotland by the 5th century A.D., although there is little hard evidence to support this (Ó Baoill, 2010). Gaelic gradually spread throughout Scotland and by the turn of the second millennium A.D., the modern Scotland southern border was more or less established under the authority of a Gaelic-speaking kingdom. However, shortly after this, Norman influences put pressure on Gaelic and it began to recede to the west. By the 15th century it was common for Lowland Scottish writers to refer to Scottish Gaelic as “Irish” (see MacLeod and Newton, 2019: 23-24). Martin refers to Gaelic as “the Irish tongue” in his account and states that in Eriskay the inhabitants speak it “more perfectly here than in most of the other islands; partly because of the remoteness…and partly because some of ‘em are scholars” (Martin, 2003: 82). This suggests that elsewhere in the islands, as early as 1697 when Martin visited, there was a sense of decline in the “Irish tongue”.

Following this, Lowland powers began increasingly to see Gaelic speaking chiefs as political threats, and in 1609 a number of these chiefs were captured and force to sign the statutes of Iona, which stipulated among other things that their sons would be educated in English in the Lowlands, and that the chiefs would be forbidden to patronise the bards, a central cultural touchstone in Gaelic society. As noted, following the battle of Culloden there was a concerted and at times forceful effort to assimilate the highlands into wider British society and economy, such that “the old semi-independence of the Highland economy was transformed into an essentially neo-colonial subordination to the requirements of the developing industries of England and Lowland Scotland” (Hunter, 2018: 44).

The integration to the market brought a decline of Gaelic through an association of English with progress and prosperity, as well as the need for greater bilingualism among seasonal labour migration (Durkacz, 1983). The reorganisation of land in the highlands that came with the age of Improvement and the Highland Clearances also resulted in a period of mass
migration and thus depopulation of Gaelic-speaking areas. During this time, state education and the churches played a significant role in the development of Gaelic literacy, particularly the SSPCK (Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge), a Protestant organisation which initially opposed Gaelic, associating it with Catholicism, but latterly pioneered education in the Gaelic medium (Macleod 2010). Secular Gaelic publishing also developed in the 18th and 19th centuries with influxes of Gaels to urban centres (more on this in chapter three). The legacy of the church thus looms large over the Gaelic world – the most common association made is between Gaelic and the Free Church, which is especially strong in Lewis, although in Benbecula, South Uist, Eriskay, and Barra the Catholic church has remained strong, and indeed the Gaelic masses are some of the only regular public events which are entirely Gaelic-medium today.

Gaelic was first included within governance in the modern nation state in 1866, when the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act made express provision for a Gaelic-speaking Crofting Commissioner, largely as a result of a need to pacify agitations from crofters. A systematic study of governance frameworks has found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that support for Gaelic has increased significantly post-devolution (Sharma, 2020). Bòrd na Gàidhlig (The Gaelic Board) was established in 2005 by the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, and its main power as a statutory body is the implementation of a National Gaelic Language Plan and the oversight of the integration of Gaelic on an equal footing with English in other public bodies. As Dunbar (2018) has noted, while there is legislation ensuring the creation of such plans, there is little in place to monitor or enforce their implementation, and indeed the impact of such plans on the attitudes of the general public are under-investigated and unclear. Along with Scots, Gaelic also holds an important place within Scottish nationalism, providing an important part of the tapestry of cultural difference within claims to separate nationhood.

The First World War saw heavy casualties among the Gaelic speaking communities, seeing a proportionately higher loss than other areas of the United Kingdom, and the general trend of rural depopulation continued throughout the twentieth century (Macleod 2010). The second half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first saw the development of Gaelic Medium Education, as well as broadcasting in Gaelic. Indeed Gaelic is arguably most vibrant in the arts, media, and education. Today Gaelic is spoken mostly in
the Western Isles. At the time of writing, the 2021 census data has not been released, but as of 2011, the highest densities of Gaelic speakers in the world were in South Uist. There is also a vibrant Gaelic-speaking tradition that has survived in Prince Edward Island in Canada, where a number of Gaelic-speakers settled following the clearances. The editors of a recent volume covering the state of Gaelic in contemporary society argue that “the future of the language is not already written, and it is certainly not written in obituary form” (MacLeod et al., 2018: 3).

The idea of language ideology has been influential in recent sociolinguistic work on Gaelic, with scholars arguing that they are important factors in determining the practices of bilingual speakers of minority languages (Dunmore, 2018; Dunmore, 2019). Dunmore has found that current language use patterns are driven by “ideologies of regret and ‘guilt’ with regard to current Gaelic (dis)use, perceptions of linguistic ‘snobbery’ in the Gaelic community, and opportunity and choice in Gaelic use,” alongside a “weak social identity in the language” (2019: 108).

McEwan-Fujita has argued that both language ideologies and affect are crucial to an understanding of language shift, and that the two are intertwined: specifically, she argues, there are “ideological and affective mismatches that arise out of encounters between people with different language socialisation experiences in the context of language shift in Uist” (2010: 38). These mismatches include an ideological commitment among learners to speak Gaelic as much as possible and Gaelic-speaking family members or community contacts who either do not speak Gaelic in the home because they perceive it to be a disadvantage or do not speak Gaelic with learners in the community because of insider/outsider group socialisations which assign Gaelic as a language for locals, and English a language for “incomers”, often as a perceived courtesy or “accommodation” to those without strong Gaelic. McEwan-Fujita suggests that because Gaelic speakers have long been socialised into a deference to English-speakers within a linguistic hierarchy that inferiorises Gaelic, they then socialise incomers into the same linguistic pattern of a preference for English when speaking to non-native islanders, even if both parties subscribe to an ideology of Gaelic preference. Thus, as McEwan-Fujita’s ethnography of Gaelic learners in Uist shows, language ideologies of preservation may conflict with the affective aspects of language shift.
Bell and McConville (2018) have identified four sets of binary oppositions of language ideology in relation to contemporary discourse around Gaelic. The first relates to anglicisms: Anglophilic ideologies claim that English is superior and Gaelic identity should be expressed in ways other than language, while Anglophobic ideology extols and pride and faithfulness to Gaelic over English. The second dimension relates to neologisms: neophilia holds that the language should be extended and modernised through new coinages and neophobia seeks to preserve Gaelic in a prior state. “Hibernianisms” relate to the incorporation of Irish words: hibernophilia encourages drawing together with Irish Gaelic and emphasising commonality for collective Gaelic revitalisation, whereas hibernophobia would maintain Scottish Gaelic’s unique character. Finally, the archaisms: retrophilia advocates for the revival of prior language practice, while retrophobia avoids archaisms.

These ideologies were identified in order to better conceptualise the work of “corpus planning” so that such planning might better serve the goals of the community.² The “dominant language ideology” identified in the Bell and McConville study through structured interviews with a variety of speakers is described by them as “retro-vernacular”, that is an ideology that “places the highest linguistic value on the vernacular language of older speakers as opposed to the tradition of formal written Gaelic of previous centuries” (Bell and McConville, 2018: 119-120), alongside a relative Hibernophobia, a level of neophobia, a grammatical Anglophobia (but not a lexical one), and a certain distrust of formal corpus development which is seen as risking an acceleration of the formalisation of Gaelic and the loss of its informal registers. As such, the primary language ideology in the Gaelic community is one that defers to the authenticity of the traditional vernacular community, which is concentrated in the islands.

One major point of ideological contention in the Gaelic world relates to the valorisation of traditional speaker communities. This relates to the growth of learner communities outside of the traditional community and centres around the question of what it is to be a Gael.

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² Corpus planning or corpus development refers to aspects of language planning which are aimed at modifying and influencing the structure of the language itself, for example orthography, style, pronunciation, or vocabulary (see Baldauf 1989).
Gael is an ethnonym commonly used in Gaelic-speaking circles (both of Irish and Scottish Gaelic) to refer to a member of the speaker community. Dunmore (2018, 2019) has written on the tendency for many to reject outright or feel uncomfortable about the term “Gael”, despite a small number of his participants (native speakers) who did identify positively with the term. This is more or less consistent with my experience – some native speakers in Uist strongly identified with the term, and others were ambivalent about it, although none I asked rejected it outright. As Dunmore found, new speakers of the language were especially unlikely to identify as Gaels, and as such an ethnolinguistic Gaelic speaking identity seems to have little currency within the broader Gaelic-speaking community. In chapter five, I discuss the ethnic dimensions of debates around the preservation of Gaelic, but for our purposes here, it will be enough to say that there is significant disagreement over whether nascent learner communities in urban areas ought to be supported while the traditional island speaker communities are struggling to maintain themselves. This debate centres around questions of indigeneity, and of proper ownership of the Scottish Gaelic language.

In practice, Gaelic is largely supported at least in theory by most residents of the islands, as well as organisations active there. The most prominent island-based Gaelic organisation is Ceòlas, which is based in South Uist, and runs a variety of events promoting Gaelic language and culture, with a special focus on music. People still value speaking with each other in spaces such as the shop, which is a frequently mentioned space in conversations about vibrant Gaelic communities. As Course and MacMillan (2021) note, certain industries such as fishing are spaces in which the language is still the language of the workplace. The same is true of crofting in many, though not all, townships. At home, many people I know proudly spoke Gaelic, while others admitted to having fallen out of the habit. A common feeling was a desire to speak more, and a feeling of guilt around not doing so.

In all, then, Gaelic is subject to a number of conflicting language ideologies in Scotland as a whole and in the islands in particular. Crucially, the ideologies to which people ascribe are not always reflected in practice: this will be an important insight for evaluating the integration of Gaelic into nature conservation work in the islands. There is a sense of Gaelic being both a language in decline and one going from strength to strength within Scottish state-building projects, including education, media, and increasing integration into...
government more broadly. However this ideology of Gaelic as a national language is contested by many who do not identify with it. The increasing state embrace of Gaelic also serves to mask the ways in which the language continues to decline as a lived language in the community, as the authors of *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*, a landmark 2020 study which will be discussed in detail later, argue (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020). There is a strong ideological commitment to traditional, spoken Gaelic within the community, but the flipside of this coin is the spectre of the ethnic Gael: if Scottish Gaelic can be accepted as a language for all of Scotland after hundreds of years of marginalisation, what is the place of the remaining vernacular community within that?

**Conserving nature: culture and conflict**

The United Kingdom has the “arguably the oldest, largest, and best-funded infrastructure for biological research and conservation in the world”. It has a “low density of species and a high density of interested humans” (Lorimer, 2015: 17). The islands, due to the relative lack of agricultural intensification and industrial development in the twentieth century, retain a richness of biodiversity that has largely disappeared on the UK mainland (CnES, 2004). The seas around the Hebrides are also exceptionally rich, and with a comparative lack of large-scale fisheries operations, have high ecosystem quality. As Hunter (1994: 205), puts it: “Our seas in the North of Scotland are as rich as our land is generally poor”. As befits such productive ecosystems, the islands are subject to an array of overlapping nature conservation designations, including 52 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (Angus and Maclennan, 2015).

The prized ecology of the islands is, however, a “semi-natural one, where habitats and people have developed in tandem, in a relationship that has delivered high biodiversity with relatively high rural population density” (Angus 2014; 42). Fishers often argue this about the marine environment (McCall Howard 2017), but it is most widely accepted about the machair. The machair is a form of coastal grassland defined by “biotic interference such as is caused by heavy grazing, sporadic cultivation, trampling and sometimes artificial draining should be a detectable influence within the recent historical period” (Angus 2006, 8). It consists of a thin layer of soil on top of shell sand dunes, and this soil layer is maintained by
animal grazing as well as the spreading of seaweed gathered from the seashore, which rots and regenerates a fertile topsoil for crop cultivation. It is “by definition, a dynamic habitat, and change is to be expected,” meaning that “defining the ‘limits of acceptable change’ for the habitat is consequently difficult” and conservation is contested (Angus and Maclennan 2015, 894). However many changes, such as the shift from cattle to sheep husbandry, as well as increasing use of artificial inputs and heavier machinery (Angus 2009), as well as shifting demographics leading to out-migration and an ageing population (Osgathorpe et al., 2011), are causing the habitat to degrade in many areas. It is a habitat for a wide variety of flora and fauna, and this degradation is having notable effects on wading birds (Calladine et al., 2014), bumblebees (Redpath-Downing et al. 2013), and others.

The valuable ecosystems of the islands are, then, dependent on the correct kind of human interference, and hands-off conservation approaches will not be effective. Contemporary environmentalism owes much of its wilderness aesthetics to 18th and 19th century Lowland romanticism, which developed representations of unpopulated Edens in Highland landscapes which had been recently depopulated (Hunter 2014). Indeed, although significant improvements have been made in the inclusion of local communities in decisions about natural resource management, there is much about the language and operation of nature conservation that alienates islanders, and throughout the islands it is well documented that conservation is widely viewed as something of an oppressive force (Brennan 2018). A core insight here is that the landscapes of the islands are not the only thing that are maintained by crofting practice. Much crofting work takes place at a communal level, traditionally. In many places this is no longer the case, but it persists in several townships. The language used in much of this work is Gaelic. As such the language is transmitted intergenerationally, and kept vibrant, in the same working practices that maintain the landscapes. Crofting practice is tightly bound up with Gaelic identity, and the history of displacement has lodged a deep connection to the land within the Gaelic consciousness. Land, then, is a particularly emotive topic for islanders – while conserving the landscape perpetuates biodiversity, it also preserves linguistic and cultural heritage, keeping alive the links between present occupants and their ancestors.
As Carpenter points out in her Foucauldian reading of nature conservation, power expresses itself in this field less through direct coercion and more through knowledge systems – indeed, “most power is well meaning” (2020, 1). As such, while conservation is often experienced as somewhat oppressive by island communities, it is of course incorrect to suggest that this is the intention of those involved in such work. Kiik (2019) notes that anthropology has had a tendency to study nature conservation from the perspective of indigenous groups but to ignore the social worlds of conservationists themselves. In these renderings, conservation science is often painted as being in conflict with cultural concerns.

It is important not to build a straw man of conservation science and conservationists, despite the limitations of its dominant ontological and epistemological frames in the face of messy sociocultural constructed realities. Much of the conservation literature is keenly aware that conservation science, as much as public environmental engagement, is based on cultural values, and that management decisions and policies can be considered “crystallisations of values”. The study of public values regarding wildlife, therefore, can be “of high relevance for conservations to help reflect upon the implicit values of biodiversity management” (Fischer and van der Wal 2007; 257). Nor are conservation scientists unaware of the criticisms of the arbitrary temporalities and spatailities or the inconsistent, emotive language of common points of contention in public engagement such as invasion biology (Selge et al. 2011).

It is well understood that without public buy-in, conservation projects are likely to fail, and as such the Scottish conservation literature aims at finding out what the values of the public might be, and how those values are expressed, in order to better manage natural resources with minimal conflict. Conflicting with this ideal is the recognition that the public may not have the appropriate knowledge or scientific literacy to enable them to make valid and meaningful contributions to management decisions (Young et al., 2014). For instance while one study found that in general while public support in Scotland for eradication of invasive non-native species is high, the preferred methods are not effective, while effective methods are unpopular – the public therefore become targets of communication and outreach in order to facilitate their preference for the “correct” options (Bremner and Park 2007). Thus the social invasion biology literature finds itself in the same quandary as most other
conservation fields: how to balance the fact that top-down, technocratic approaches to environmental management are often incompatible with social, cultural and political norms with a positivistic disciplinary worldview that by definition devalues these norms as non-scientific knowledge and therefore not valid decision-making tools?

Thus ecologists are also aware that invasive species management does not take place in a social and cultural vacuum, that human relationships with the environment take many diverse forms in small geographical spaces, and that these cultural drivers can lead to conflict. This leads to a body of literature that examines different approaches that might be taken to conserve nature in the context of conflicts (Crowley et al 2017). There is also a more optimistic literature that aims at effective mediation and the resolution of conflict on a deeper level, producing a “convivial conservation.” In the Scottish context, Staddon argues that it is imperative to move beyond accounts of stereotyped stakeholder groups and the “social drama framework that presumes difference”, stressing instead a vision for a more cooperative conservation landscape defined by ideals of “having a blether” across social groups, a Scottish term for chatting informally, as a model for a more convivial conservation practice in the midst of conflict (2021: 169).

In some conservation settings, there is a large corpus of documentation of conflict, with media representation and policy statements produced by stakeholder groups (e.g. Webb and Rafaelli, 2008). Environmental anthropologists have done important work documenting the relationship between conservation projects and the displacement of vulnerable populations (Agrawal and Redford, 2009). But what happens when the displacement in question happened generations ago, and the conflict bubbles under the surface? In Uist, often the conflicts are not well articulated or documented, they are scarcely present except in throwaway comments, pregnant silences, and meaningful looks. As Bresnihan and Millner (2023) argue, those working for the environment often do not appear as environmentalists: this is certainly relevant to the crofting community who have maintained the islands’ biodiversity for years yet they do not appear in many accounts as environmentalists, just as their environmental conflict does not always show as conflict. These are slow-burning conflicts that run deep, that have their roots in old wounds, in feelings of dispossession that stretch back further in time. This then is not a story of conservation conflict as such:
although there are moments where conflict arises, the story I tell here is of a more subtle dynamic. I do not tell an optimistic story of the convivial conservation practice of “having a blether”, or a straightforwardly pessimistic story of oppressive conservation practice, but rather a realistic story of real people in a real place, struggling to make that place liveable for themselves and for other beings without compromising the unique cultural resources of that place.

*Ideologies of Nature and Language*

A focus on efforts to rescue both cultural and natural heritage at the same time helps us to see how such quiet conflicts operate. Many valuable social studies of island natures operate on the basis of a study of nature conservation or resource conflict in the context of Gaelic language and culture, (e.g. Brennan, 2016; Murphy, 2013). In this thesis, I choose to take Helmrreich’s approach to context, not as “parts which immediately precede or follow any particular passage or ‘text’ and determine its meaning” but as a “weaving together” (2005, 124) – that is, I see the Gaelic culture of the islands not as the cultural context in which nature is produced in the islands, but rather I see the production of both Gaelic and nature as woven up in each other. This is reflected in the structure of the thesis, in which each chapter juxtaposes and weaves together aspects of efforts to preserve Gaelic and nature into one account based on a particular theme.

The problem of environmental anthropology has often been of how the supposed universality of nature operates in a world defined by diversity of natures (Tsing, 2005). Others still (Haraway, 2008) have blended nature and culture together to form naturecultures, concepts which enable us to reckon with the inextricability of the cultural from the natural, to contend with the multispecies worlds in which we live. Ethnographic examples of this intermeshedness abound, demonstrating the ways in which people experience themselves as integrated into nature and not separated from it as Cartesian dualisms would posit (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). These intellectual tools have been exceptionally useful in untangling the knots of power and knowledge in international environmental governance and conservation. They have provided the vital intervention of dismantling the universal nature concept, revealing how ontological contradictions combine
with structures of power and lead to the inefficacy of many conservation initiatives (West 2006).

While it is important to take these insights into account, I also caution against them in the study of Scotland. What this thesis grapples with, standing on the shoulders of such giants, is what happens to these explosions of the nature concept in Scotland? This is a country that prides itself on its historical connections and continuity with the philosophy of the enlightenment, itself a terminological shorthand in poststructural nature theory for the bogeyman of nature-culture dualism. McCall Howard (2017), in her ethnography of Scottish fishing, argues that anthropologists have a responsibility to represent the material conditions of life in capitalist Scotland rather than to get carried away with abstractions of the philosophy of nature.

As such, my approach to “nature” in this thesis will draw more on this political ecological school of thought. Through environmental governance, certain “ideologies of nature” (ibid.) come together in a series of worldbuilding practices which aim to “compose a reality” (Bresnihan, 2017) in which anything other than a particular (neoliberal) form of social and ecological solution becomes “difficult to imagine” (St Martin 2007). This shifts focus from an ontological approach to nature and seeks instead to examine the material effects of the construction of particular kinds of natures and languages. As Lorimer (2015) points out, the work of nature conservation is performative, involved in “ontological choreography” in which human and animal bodies are caught up in the performative building of worlds. With this in mind, we can still grapple with the ongoing social construction and contestation of nature, but in a way that takes seriously the fact that in contemporary Scotland, the nature-culture binary is an emic ethnographic concept.

When looking at the ways in which nature (and Gaelic) are constructed, the performative speech act is a core part of the analytical toolbox. Bourdieu tells us, “even the most strictly constative scientific description is always open to the possibility of functioning in a prescriptive way, capable of contributing to its own verification by exercising a theory effect through which it helps to bring about that which it declares” (Bourdieu 1991, 134). In this way we can see that any utterance may be considered to have the potential of a speech act,
and this insight will be vital throughout the thesis, as I examine the performative power of texts in linguistic and natural worlds.

The idea of a linguistic ideology or language ideology is vital one here. It was first introduced by Silverstein in 1979. He defines such ideologies as “any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalisation of justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979, 193). Silverstein draws on the work of Whorf, whose work he characterises as “talking about the way people who speak a certain language form an ideology of reference, an understanding at the conceptual level of how their language represents ‘nature’” (ibid., 202). For Silverstein, the core of European language ideology is an assumption that the structures of language map neatly onto and straightforwardly represent the physical world. These ideologies are significant outside of the realm of linguistic analysis: various social institutions including the educational systems, governance structures and the nation state itself hinge on the “ideologization of language use”. Furthermore, ideologies about the usefulness of language may lead to the decline of minority languages, ideologies of linguistic standardisation, purity, and correctness reveal how “the existence of a language is always a discursive project rather than an established fact” (Woolard and Shieffelin 1994, 64). Language ideologies, then, become sites of struggle and conflict as different views on language come into contact with one another.

Speech act theory has itself been pointed out to be “grounded in English linguistic ideology, a privatised view of language emphasising the psychological state of the speaker”, thus “rooted in Western conceptions of the self” (Woolard and Schifflin 1994, 59-60). This is a core insight, and one that informs what follows in the thesis, as I explore the distinct kinds of performative utterances and the work they do in moulding the islands. In each case, it will be important to think about the culturally specific ways in which these linguistic modes manifest themselves in the Gaelic speaking world, as these will be seen to mirror an “English linguistic ideology” in some ways, but to diverge from it in others. If we speak about the performative power of language within nature conservation, doing so with a determined interweaving of this account with accounts of Gaelic discourse makes the key theoretical intervention that it matters which language is being spoken. Furthermore, it shows us that it
is not just “nature” that is brought into being and transformed through language, but that the language itself may be transformed through its interaction with the nature concept.

**Methods**

*The “Community” of Study*

Since I was interested in getting a broad picture of the rich tapestry of island life, I sought perspectives from different subsets of the Uist “community”. This included the usual suspects in social science work on the region, namely native Gaelic-speakers, crofters, and fishers, to understand perspectives on both environmental management and language shift from the point of view of those engaged in traditional island livelihoods. If ecologists may be at times guilty of fetishizing highland and island wilderness ecologies on the brink of disappearance, often so too are anthropologists – as Kohn (2002) has pointed out, scholars have a tendency to ignore “foreign” elements of island communities in Scottish anthropology and history. Such incomers are commonly considered to be irrelevant to island identity or mere intrusions and therefore excluded from anthropological accounts of island life. She has shown the ways in which incomers to an insular community may constitute their island identities through practice, rather than through some fixed Celtic ethnic identity that is inevitably imagined to be in decline. As such my project remains open to incomers as well as “natives” in the construction of island worlds.

On that note, another major demographic in my list of interviewees were environmental management professionals, most of whom came from the mainland. This included people who worked for the Scottish Government in various capacities, as well as conservationists, wildlife rangers, and gamekeepers employed by NGOs or by the local estates or County Council. Related to this subset were those who worked in rural development. These professionals of development and wildlife management were important for understanding infrastructures of environmental governance and the textures of managing the islands’ land- and waterscapes. The next-most significant group of people I interviewed were the islands’ considerable community of amateur naturalists. A further mention is necessary of the islands’ artists, in whom I became interested as the question of representation became more central to my thinking about the project. In addition, I spoke to people who worked in
the aquaculture industry, the tourism industry, priests, landowners, people involved in cultural organisations, archaeologists, vets, and local residents who had no professional affiliation with the environment or with Gaelic.

It should be stated that these categories of people intersected, and almost none of my interlocutors belong to only one category. For instance, there was significant overlap between the community of naturalists and those who worked professionally in environmental management: many had been employed by various environmental agencies at one point or another, and some retained strong connections with national or regional agencies and organisations on a voluntary basis. There were also many people who straddled the divide of artist and conservationist or naturalist. Crofters and fishers in particular were very likely to also be engaged in tourism in some capacity. For the most part the crofters and fishers I spoke to were Gaelic speakers, but by no means all. Many of the development and environmental professionals had Gaelic, but the majority did not. One segment of this Venn diagram that was almost entirely empty was the one linking those with an amateur interest in the natural environment and Gaelic speakers. It is also important to note that there are a number of other “communities” with which I did not engage during my time in Uist – while I cast a broad net in my recruitment, I largely restricted my conversations to people who had an active or obvious stake in the preservation of either the natural environment or the Gaelic language. There are many people living in the islands who have little to no engagement with either of these things, and there are of course many corners of the island community left unexplored here.

Timelines and Covid
This study is based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork between November 2019 and December 2021. During this time I lived primarily in South Uist: I lodged with an “incomer” (i.e. people who are not from the islands originally) couple in Daliburgh, one of the larger settlements in South Uist, from November 2019 to September 2020. At this point I moved into a house on a working croft in Frobost, a few miles north of Daliburgh. I lived here until I finished fieldwork in December 2021, with a four-month break from December 2020 to
March 2021 when I was stuck in Dublin, having travelled home for Christmas just before a further Covid19 lockdown went into effect in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Much of the time in my first fieldwork period (November 2019 to December 2020) was spent in a state of lockdown, during which in-person ethnographic fieldwork was not possible.

In the periods between or following lockdowns, the pandemic continued to impact island life significantly, and my fieldwork along with it. Many of my interlocutors were elderly, and as such there were times when, while there was no official restriction in place, it was judged unwise to meet in person. The pandemic also significantly restricted my mobility until I acquired my driving license in November 2020. I was a particularly disastrous driving student and failed my test twice in the early months of 2020, after which time tests were suspended until November, when I finally passed. Until that point I was reliant on lifts from acquaintances, hitchhiking, or a patchy bus service to get around, and for much of that period it was not possible for me to receive lifts from people outside my household, meaning that many places and activities were inaccessible to me. During this time I conducted interviews digitally and carried out some participant observation, but primarily gathered data from online events, social media, and documents. This time spent working with documents and virtual sources may explain what came to be a central intellectual preoccupation in the course of my fieldwork – that of the power of the written word in the making of worlds. The impact of that time’s social restriction on my ability to immerse myself in island life cannot be understated. From April until December 2021, however, I had relatively unrestricted access to the islands and an ancient but reliable Ford Fiesta at my disposal. It was during this time that the majority of my interviews and participant observation took place.

Documents and Social Media

During this period, as I have mentioned, I relied on documentary sources to gather what material I could in the absence of opportunities to spend time with people in person. Life in the United Kingdom is to a large degree textually mediated (see Chapter Three) and I believe that the documents and texts are as much a part of the fabric of the everyday as conversation. As such, while the emphasis of my fieldwork certainly shifted towards the
textual during the lockdown, that is not to say that this should be seen as a supplementary activity or merely as a way that I passed time when I was unable to carry out physical fieldwork.

I monitored a variety of social media forums during this time: these consisted of local message boards and also groups dedicated to discussion and identification of wildlife. These forums proved at times to be exceptionally rich windows into the everyday concerns of islanders and I began to see them as crowd-sourced archives of island life, as detailed, searchable repositories of conversations between people. Particularly during lockdown, these forums were particularly active sites for debate on a variety of topics including aspects of Gaelic language, climate change, or the minutiae of species identification, and as digital spaces they brought together people who might not have otherwise crossed paths in the physical world, allowing for conversations and encounters to emerge that demonstrated the variety of perspectives in the community.

More formal documents also form a major subset of the data that I present here. Again, I believe that these published materials are important social phenomena and play a key role in the construction of worlds. In particular, I present data from formally published documents such as government reports (e.g. Chapter Four) and scientific studies and academic debates (e.g. Chapter Five) and I want to make it clear that I see these not as bibliographic sources but as data through which to understand the diverse actors in the field of study. Some of these actors participate and intervene in social life largely through textual media and not physical presence, but this does not make their action less worthy of inclusion as social action.

Participant Observation

Where I was able to conduct participant observation, I did so in a number of settings and with different actors. Activities were chosen in the working lives of professionals or in community settings in which issues pertaining to the management of the natural environment or the Gaelic language were likely to come to the fore. I spent time on fishing boats, as these are in many cases rare spaces where Gaelic is still spoken in a work-related...
setting. Fishers also find themselves at the forefront of interactions between human economies and policies and the nonhuman environment. To gain insights on the work of conservation itself, I volunteered with the RSPB on nature reserves, and spent time with NatureScot conservationists as they conducted their own fieldwork. I did work on crofts, and indeed lived on a working croft. I attended a variety of community events, including Gaelic and other cultural events, community consultations, beach cleans, and assorted other environmental happenings throughout the islands, including feral cat trapping and helping to load a dead dolphin in a body bag into a truck to be shipped to the mainland for a post-mortem. Probably more important than any of this, I lived my life in the islands: I made friends there and played in traditional music sessions, attended Gaelic classes, swam in the pool and chatted to crofters about lambing in the sauna, I joined a community garden, took the bus, learned to drive, walked on the beach, got to know the staff in the supermarket, temporarily adopted a cat, and sourced fresh shellfish and meat in informal local economies. During the times when island life was able to proceed relatively undisturbed by lockdowns, I learned the textures of everyday life.

One of my interlocutors who worked in community development told me how she valued above all else the “conversations over the fence” with neighbours for coming to understand the priorities of island residents, far above the results of formal consultation methodologies. We agreed that these short, often formulaic chats with neighbours and acquaintances over the fence or in the supermarket were vital data for understanding island lives. Indeed as Driessen and Jansen (2013) have argued, small talk, or “phatic communication”, is a key part of the ethnographer’s toolkit. In their formulation, they distinguish “small talk” in everyday situations from the qualitative interview as different techniques: in mundane settings, small talk builds rapport and yields personal details that enable thick description of the texture of life. This was certainly the case in my daily life in the islands, but for me moments of small talk that emerged throughout my day, or even to fill the inevitable silences during interviews (an occupational hazard of an unstructured interview) were also crucial spaces in which valuable data emerged, or small talk at the beginning of a meeting could be used as jumping off points for discussion. The first topic of conversation that led to discussion of my research methods was the weather: British people are notorious for talking about the weather, but particularly in the islands, where 50 mile per hour winds are a common
occurrence and many people make their living outdoors, the weather occupies a central space in daily life. Weather was also an invaluable way to lead into the experience of climate change: people would routinely tell me this was the wettest winter, or the windiest October, or the coldest May they remembered, and this would lead easily into discussions of environmental change more broadly. Gaelic itself was also a useful tool of small talk: fluent speakers might ask me if I had Gaelic and we would exchange a few sentences in the language, or it might come up that my interlocutor had tried themselves to learn it and either struggled or succeeded. This then could facilitate a conversation about the place that Gaelic holds in that person’s life.

Interviews
My research, in the end, came to rely more heavily on interview data than I had initially hoped – due to the condensed time in which I had access to unrestricted social interaction, a focus on interview as practice seemed to be the best way to gain the broad spectrum of views that I was looking for. The distinction between interviews and participant observation was often blurred: there were times when the best way to interview someone with a busy schedule was to follow them around seeking out patches of invasive gunnera to destroy, or an interview with an ornithologist became a practical session in the basics of bird ringing. Likewise, participant observation blended into interviews in many settings: mini interviews came about on fishing boats about personal relationships to language shift, or questions about the professionalisation of wildlife management morphed into something like an interview while setting camera traps for a hedgehog population survey. As such, I do not wish to overlabour this distinction as though they are mutually exclusive, but there are some distinctive features of the interview that have proven to be strengths for analysis.

There is a tendency in social anthropology to think of the interview as a secondary or supplementary method to the more truly immersive ideal of participant observation. It is often said that participant observation allows us to “see what people do versus what they say”. Indeed ethnography and participant observation are often thought of as being one and the same thing. The realities of fieldwork in a pandemic required, to some extent, a departure from this ideal form of fieldwork modelled on the Malinowskian myth, but, as
Hockey and Forsey (2012) argue, “ethnography is not participant observation”, as an addendum to Ingold’s (2008) assertion that “anthropology is not ethnography”. They point out that in conducting ethnographic interviews, “many of the idealised attributes of participant observation can be achieved”, and indeed to “hear from our participants their insights about the gap between what they say and what they do” (ibid., 83). For it is not only the ethnographer who is capable of noting this discrepancy, and furthermore the approach which aims to expose such gaps generates a research relationship characterised by mistrust and suspicion which strikes me as unproductive of authentic encounters with interlocutors.

Hockey has argued that the interview might be a more appropriate method for anthropological research in Britain: “research sites are heterogenous and scattered, the weather is dire and everything interesting seems to be going on behind closed doors” (2002, 209). Additionally, it is important to note that “communities no longer cohere simply on the ground but, increasingly around occupational, leisure or cultural interests which transcend space” (ibid., 215). This is true in Uist, where there are multiple communities living alongside each other, some of which overlap and others which seem to exist in parallel universes. It is therefore not possible to get an accurate sense of island life simply by immersing oneself and “being there”. The interview, for Hockey, in its emphasis on story over direct experience, and its relative fragmentation in time and isolation from community context, may in fact be more “experience-near” for the realities of contemporary life in Britain.

The unstructured interview technique was alien to some of my interlocutors, who often expected to answer the set list of questions evoked by the word “interview”. As such I would explain at the beginning of the interview my rationale for carrying it out in this manner. For some of my more pragmatically minded interlocutors this proved too strange a proposition and as such I had in most cases prepared a rough semi-structured guide beforehand which I could fall back on should my ideal goal of a free-flowing conversation prove impossible. In many cases there were specific pieces of information I needed from individuals, but in general I tried to leave these questions until the end of the encounter, again in order to allow for a spontaneous encounter to emerge beforehand.
The use of the interview as a primary method has also enables me to produce my analysis and present my data in particular ways. With the exception of three interlocutors who did not feel comfortable with being recorded, I am able to reproduce through interview transcripts the words of my participants verbatim. Thus when I recount a conversation that took place with a pot of tea and a voice recorder on the table, I do not paraphrase but allow the speaker’s turns of phrase to hold their own space in my account. This is the approach I take as far as possible in my ethnography, trying to weave together the voices of islanders in unmodified form (beyond the distortion of their transformation into text). Interviews gave my interlocutors a space to theorise themselves about what might be going on, and the recording allows me to include such emic explanations of social processes alongside my own theorisation.

A proportion of these were carried out over the phone or by video call, but for the most part I endeavoured to carry these interviews out in person. This is a function of my unstructured approach to interview technique, in which I tried to have as natural a conversation as possible. This is difficult to achieve with a stranger by video call, a medium that tends to emphasise the formality of the occasion rather than facilitating rapport and ease. I committed to taking an unstructured approach because I did not want to overdetermine the direction of the conversation. I felt it was important that I allow my interlocutors to tell their own stories without too much narrative steering from me. This way, I hoped, I would be able to discover unexpected stories that might be missed in a more rigorously structured conversation. I would explain that I was exploring how people in Uist related to the natural environment, and that I was interested in figuring out what role Gaelic language and culture played within this. When I explained my research interests, I avoided using loaded terms like “decline” in relation to Gaelic or the environment, to enable interlocutors to interpret the world around them in their own way and spin their narratives without working within a suggested framework from the beginning.
It is worth dwelling for a moment at this point on the place of Gaelic within my project. I began learning Gaelic in 2018 when I moved to Edinburgh to begin work on this project. I had studied Irish, a closely related language, throughout my school years and spoken the language sporadically in my time living in London (largely as a secret code with other Irish people) and so I had a reasonable working knowledge if not a particularly eloquent aptitude. This prior experience with a closely related language meant that I picked up Scottish Gaelic, like its Irish counterpart a notoriously difficult language to learn, relatively quickly, and I can hold an uncomplicated conversation and interpret Gaelic literature without much difficulty. My initial ambition was to carry out as much fieldwork as possible in Gaelic: my thinking was that particularly on subjects such as crofting or fishing, people might be more comfortable conversing in Gaelic than in English. However, beginning fieldwork with a year of tuition, I did not feel confident carrying out interviews in the language. My concern was that I would misinterpret more complex ideas or miss nuances and subtle connotations that my bilingual interlocutors were perfectly comfortable expressing in English.

Furthermore, it became clear to me that many native speakers feel uncomfortable speaking with learners: on one level, this is related to the frustration of having to conduct a simplified conversation with a non-fluent speaker when there is an available language in which both speakers are fluent. On another, it is also the case that many native speakers feel insecure about their Gaelic. This has two facets, one being that Gaelic speakers can at times be quite harshly critical of each other’s Gaelic and some fear judgement by peers. There is also an insecurity speaking to learners who tend to have picked up a standardised version of the language which, for those who may have no formal education in Gaelic, can be intimidating and make speakers of localised dialects feel as though they speak an “incorrect” version: in short, learners speak “posh” Gaelic, and this can be alienating. My experience trying to use Gaelic in daily life was characterised by this tension: people who were ideologically committed to using Gaelic as much as possible might stick with me, but many either switched to English trying to facilitate a more natural conversation, or out of other discomfort with a learner. Bearing all of this in mind, I did not force the issue: my earlier commitment to including Gaelic in the research process was part of an ethical commitment
to resisting Anglocentrism, but to insist on it at the expense of my interlocutors’ comfort and the (heightened) risk of misinterpretation seemed to undo the benefits of the approach, making it more about my own ego as an anthropologist working within an intellectual tradition that values work in a language other than one’s own native tongue.

**Positionality**

The discussion of Gaelic, I think, leads naturally into an examination of my own positionality within this research. Rapport, in his introduction to an early edited volume of the Anthropology of Britain, claims as one of his core “tenets” that “an anthropology ‘at home’ in Britain might be seen to be paradigmatic” because of familiarity with “linguistic denotation” and behavioural form” (Rapport, 2002; 6-7). I have on occasion been described conducting “anthropology at home”, a characterisation with which I disagree. Of course, as many ethnographers have written, the question of whether one is an insider or an outsider in one’s research context is a complex one – see e.g. Narayan (1993) on the “nativeness” of the “native anthropologist.” In some ways it is true: I am a native English speaker, and I have lived in the United Kingdom for a decade at the time of writing. From the perspective of Gaelic culture, I am in some ways more at home than many Scottish people would have been. As mentioned previously, my competency in Irish was an asset, but my extra-linguistic Irishness was also invaluable. It provides me with a personal understanding of the particular kind of relationship Scottish Gaels have with a Britishness that is often ascribed to them and with which they do not identify. This common relationship with peripherality within an Anglocentric archipelago was often a fast track to rapport: as one woman from South Uist once said to me at a party, “the Irish and Hebrideans always get on because we’re all Teuchters really”. Being Irish in Gaelic circles, even with my lack of fluency, also granted me a certain social legitimacy: people understood why I would take an interest in a language with close cultural and political ties to that of my own home country while learners from elsewhere might be met with a bafflement or even suspicion. The Gaelic of South Uist is closer in many ways to Irish than the Lewis-inflected Gaelic I learnt from my teachers at Edinburgh and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – in fact on my first attempt at holding a conversation with an Uibhisteach he asked me, “So you speak Donegal Irish then?” I asked him how he

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3 Teuchter is a pejorative term for Highlander in Scotland.
knew this, and he said, “Because I can understand you – Donegal Irish is closer to ours.” This was disappointing in that my interlocutor thought I was speaking Irish and not Scottish Gaelic, but also instructive in the closeness of dialect.

**Ethics**

In my research I used verbal consent with my interlocutors. Prior to conducting participant observation or interviews with them, individuals were informed that our conversations would be used to inform my thesis and may potentially appear in academic publications. I gave my interlocutors the opportunity to review a copy of interview transcripts or my thesis before submission or publication. They were informed of their rights in relation to the research, and I emphasised that at any point they could get in touch with me and withdraw from the study completely or strike certain information from the record, in which case I would delete all material pertaining to them or the specific piece of data in question.

At public events, it was not possible to obtain the individual consent of each individual. In these cases, any interactions I had with people were done after I had introduced myself as a researcher. Additionally, event organisers were made aware of my presence as a researcher. My approach to social media is similar – I have not included anything as data that was shared only to an individual’s friends, but I considered posts in forums that are open to the public to be in the public domain and therefore to be admissible pieces of data without attaining formal consent.

While my research does not deal with personal relationships or the intimate details of private lives, the issues I study are charged with emotional and political force, and the potential for harm cannot be ignored here. The anthropologist Emily McEwan-Fujita notes that in the context of a small community in which voices are often easily recognisable through the haze of anonymisation, many researchers anxiously “delay or abandon the effort to write up their research on Gaelic language shift,” even though it may “spell the end of their academic career” (2010b, 199). With these insights in mind – that my field site and subject matter come with risks of harm to participants or collective political causes – I have made every effort to anonymise individuals through the use of composite characters and
the removal of details that might easily identify them. Furthermore Williams (2022) also notes that the neoliberal policy and funding context is such that Gaelic agencies are dependent on ongoing grants, and as such negative academic work or other public criticism of such agencies could theoretically lead to a reduction in funding. This is a risk, also hinted at by McEwan-Fujita, for which I cannot fully control, and it is my intention to honour the time given to me by my interlocutors by contributing something useful to debates about how best to proceed in the protection of the islands’ natural and cultural heritage without damaging resolve or diluting support.

**Thesis Outline**

In order to seek the answer to my central question – why nature conservation and Gaelic language revitalisation do not seem to be able to work together as they should – my thesis is organised around six themes, each of which provides a space for comparison between aspects of nature conservation and the politics of language conservation. The first two chapters focus on discursive tropes that characterise the governance of, and debates around, the future of the islands’ heritage: nature and community. Increasingly, community consultation and participatory management has become a standard component in environmental management, which promises the possibility of integrating islanders more clearly into their environmental futures. However, as I argue in Chapter One, there is a mismatch between understandings of who constitutes the “community” that prevents meaningful engagement with management processes. My consideration of nature sets the scene of the nonhuman environment of the islands, which has been profoundly shaped by human action over millennia, both in the sense of its degradation and also in that its rarest habitats are dependent on human activity such as low-intensity animal husbandry, which in itself is tightly bound up with Gaelic-speaking communities. The fates of these communities and the nonhuman inhabitants are interwoven with each other, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, but the restrictive grip of nature-culture dualism remains firm on imaginations of potential socioecological futures. This chapter argues that traditional island lifeways have long been, and still are, co-opted within particular frameworks of landscape management that are at odds with islanders’ self-understanding of what they do.
Chapter Three begins with a consideration of the performative power of writing texts to construct and shape the islands across time. The islands have long been subject to written discourses detailing their linguistic and natural heritage, usually in a nostalgic tone, and are subject to a wide variety of everyday writing practices which equally shape the islands in subtle ways: this chapter argues that the production of everyday texts actively shapes the present and future of the islands. I then, in Chapter Four, consider practices of naming and translating within the context of taxonomic practices. I engage with contemporary practices of biological recording in the islands and put this into conversation with the ways in which Gaelic taxonomies are produced and circulated. This chapter argues that translation and naming are sites in which both the natural world and the languages used come to be valued or devalued in particular ways: can minority languages be taken seriously as languages of science or are they restricted to the picturesque mode of nature appreciation?

In Chapter Five, I draw on my arguments about the misunderstood entities of community and nature to examine a set of ideas which confound the socioecologies of the islands: invasiveness and indigeneity. Here I cross-compare the logics that are inherent in debates around who and what belongs in the island. I compare discourse and practice around invasive species control with the growing popularity of the framework of indigeneity to understand islander identity, which expresses itself in anxieties around environmental policy and Gaelic language vitality in the context of increasing house prices driven by migration from the more affluent UK mainland. Finally, I consider the performative practice of prediction. I consider climate forecasting, statistical language modelling, and the Gaelic tradition of prophecy as worldmaking practices which aim to produce particular outcomes for the islands’ inhabitants. Each of these chapters contributes to discussions of how language and the natural environment co-shape each other, in the context of the imbalances between how Gaelic and the natural environment are constructed as objects under threat and more or less worthy of rescue.
CHAPTER ONE

“Empowerment and all those bloody words!”: Ontologies, Epistemologies, and the Trouble with Community

Introduction: “We’re All on the Same Side”

It’s a stormy Friday afternoon in February, a month into my first main fieldwork period, and a month before the coronavirus pandemic restricts my research. I walk the short distance from my house in Daliburgh to the office of Ceòlas, a South Uist Gaelic music organisation. Here I have a chat with a member of staff about environmental designations, Gaelic poetry, and some local characters of note, including the “original environmental warrior”. Then when I tell her I have to go to catch the bus to Lochboisdale in order to attend a community consultation about the Sea of the Hebrides Marine Protected Area (MPA), she tells me she can give me a lift because she is planning on attending the consultation herself.

We climb into her car and drive to Lochboisdale for the consultation event – my companion asks the organiser a quick question and then disappears again. The event is attended mainly by a variety of nature enthusiasts who I know from Curraeag events, as well as two fishermen. There are activities set up for attendees to add images and words to a map of the islands, in an attempt to elicit a sense of the meanings local residents attach to the islands’ coasts. On the wall are big sheets of paper with direct questions about the MPA, and we are encouraged to write our thoughts on these. Finally, we are asked to write our hopes and fears for the seas on sheets of paper and fold them into paper boats. The two fishermen stand to one side and speak with one of the event organisers for the duration of the event, not participating in the activities.

Next up in my day, I need to catch a bus to the north end of South Uist where a friend is picking me up and we’re going for a swim before heading to Charlie’s Bistro, a Benbecula restaurant, for a music session. Having now missed the last bus from Lochboisdale, I manage

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4 Curraeag is a natural history organisation that operates throughout the Western Isles, but is most active in Uist.
to grab a lift from one of the natural history enthusiasts back to the main spinal road where I might still catch a northbound bus. In the car, he expresses some frustration about the art activities as a method for consultation (back at the map, he had drawn in a sea monster, partly in tongue-in-cheek protest at what he found a patronising event, and partly in a semi-serious rumination of the unplumbed mysteries of marine biodiversity). He also complains that there is a tendency to discuss fishing and conservation as though they are on two opposing sides, and insists that “we’re all on the same side – focusing on different sides only makes the situation turn out that way.”

I manage to catch the last bus of the day in the late afternoon, a minibus with capacity for roughly 15 passengers. I’m the only passenger today and I spend the journey to Lochcarnan chatting to the driver, a crofter from South Uist who tells me about the personalities and flock social dynamics of her sheep. When I get off, the wind is blowing at 40 miles per hour and the rain is travelling horizontally. I have no signal on my phone and have no choice but to hope my friend arrives soon. Standing at the northwest corner of South Uist with Atlantic gales doing their best to blow me onto the road, I can’t help reflecting on the life decisions that have brought me to this point. Just as I’m about to stick my thumb out to hitchhike, my friend arrives, and we head for a swim in the secondary school on Benbecula. Here we get chatting to a crofter in the sauna who tells us he’s getting an early start on his lambing. Next, we head to the session, where I muddle through some tunes on my tin whistle, and chat to the rag-tag assortment of people who have shown up, mainly music degree students at the University of the Highlands and Islands campus in Benbecula, one of whom organises the weekly session, but also a few locals and blow-ins such as myself. The sessions were organised to provide the students with a space in which to play music in a social setting, the main draw of the programme in the islands, and something which was largely found to be lacking by the students when they arrived. The owner of the restaurant is a piper himself, and provided free food to the musicians, eager to fill the space in the winter months when tourism is sparse, and hopeful that regular music might draw in local residents.

The next morning I head down to the Daliburgh charity shop, which opens on a Thursday and a Saturday, and serves tea and cake for £1 at one end of the room, with the other end reserved for the charity shop itself. When I come in, the woman behind the counter (who
will, later this year, become my landlady) asks me if I know anybody, and I tell her I know some of the women sitting at a table, so I’m told to join them. We pass the time eating cake, some of which was in fact baked by the women at the table, and discussing the kinship networks of a variety of local people. Later on, I play some more tunes with some of the crowd from the session of the previous night, on my way north for a party which is attended by most of the 20-30-somethings that I come across during my time in the islands.

In the course of this weekend I have just recounted, I shift through a variety of incarnations of something which we might refer to as the “community” in the islands. First, I spend time in the office of an organisation which many would hail as a success story of grassroots community cultural work in the islands, where I pick up some local gossip. I then find myself in a formal consultation in which the community is asked to coalesce into a coherent form in order to interface with government policy. I then find myself in the secondary school, on the campus of which are many vital local services such as the pool and the library, becoming a community hub. Following that, I attend a music session in a restaurant, organised by music students who have come to the islands to find this kind of musical community in its nightlife, but found it either absent or simply unavailable to them within obscure local home ceilidh networks. The next day I find myself in another locally organised space, the charity shop. Meanwhile, as yet unable to drive, I cobble together my transportation from a mixture of personal connections and precarious locally provided public transportation which is a lifeline for many residents to remain connected to the islands beyond their township.

All of this activity is dependent on different versions on community to take place: funding for public services and the arts requires a version of community to be evoked in official settings – that is, people find themselves in a situation where they must evoke the “community” to acquire resources through an act of strategic essentialism. A mirror image to this version of community is the kind that policymakers require to be performed in order to legitimise decision-making processes: in order for participatory democracy to fly, people must show up and formulate themselves as “the community” when they participate in consultation. The music session depends on the goodwill of local business owners and over the course of its short lifespan before the pandemic put it out of commission, word of mouth allowed it to grow beyond the initial small core of students at the university. The
charity shop and café mobilise a cohort of local women to bake and serve tea, as well as depending on donations from local residents.

However the community is not only enabling: it is also restrictive. It is a truism that for a community to exist by inclusion implies the necessity of exclusion. This exclusion is keenly felt by many: a common complaint from incomers was that it is impossible to feel fully included in islander communities. Likewise islanders often also felt excluded from the various organised communities that sprung up via committee or that express themselves in community consultations, spheres dominated largely by the “usual suspects” of incomers. The exclusiveness of “community” as a unit of analysis becomes obvious in the controversies surrounding the *Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*: critiques of this work centred around the vagueness of the term “vernacular community” (MacLeod at el., 2022) and its tendency toward an essentialist notion of the ethnic Gael to whom Gaelic belongs. Yet, potentially problematic underlying philosophies aside, the concept of community is meaningful to those who might be said to comprise it. The community also finds itself as the core organising concept behind policy and economic instruments to which islanders have access in order to protect their threatened heritage. So how do we reconcile the multiplicity of the community: community as exclusionary rhetoric, the community as non-representative, the community as lived reality, and the community as pathway to navigating the state and its resources?

This chapter engages with the tensions of community in Uist on ontological and epistemological terms. I first question the ontological status of the community itself, arguing that many of the issues and tensions of community governance emerge where there are contradictions and misunderstandings about what the “community” is, and who is included. Epistemology engages the knowledge politics between the “community” and those who seek to speak for it, characterising one of the core tensions of community governance as residing along the boundaries of education and ignorance, taking on a pedagogical character which is indicative of power differentials in the population. What do we know about “the community”, how do we come to know about it in the first place, and what does the community know? I argue that the core problems facing community governance stem from
mismatches in the ontological status of the community and the epistemological imbalances that emerge from these mismatches.

In this and the following chapter I turn to two discursive figures that are integral to the different versions of the islands that various actors are seeking to bring into being: community and nature. Broadly speaking, the section has the following trajectory: first, we ask who are the people who manage nature in Uist; second I ask what kind of nature that they are trying to manage, and what are the means by which this is done; third, having established the difficulties of defining these two entities, I examine a mode of discourse in which they form the basis, that is contestations of who and what belongs in Uist, socially and environmentally.

My narrative tries to balance those who are from the islands and those who are not. Kohn (2002) has critiqued this tendency in writing about the region which often erases or dismisses the experiences of the latter camp, and rightly points out the many shades of grey in between the two. This causes a quandary in my account here which largely discusses my interlocutors’ understandings of this distinction, and any label used is likely to oversimplify the situation. For reasons discussed in further detail in Chapter Five I will avoid terms like “native” or “indigenous” to refer to people with hereditary ties to the islands. Kohn uses the terminology of the “islander/incomer continuum” and so for ease of comprehension, I will do the same: when I am referring to those who represent traditional island identities, e.g. having grown up there, speaking Gaelic, crofting, etc., I will use the term “islander”. I will refer to those who have moved there as “incomers.”

**Theorising, Making, and Managing Communities**

Before I delve into the ontologies and epistemologies of the community in Uist, I take some time to think about my own approach to the community concept, as well as the ways in which it has been operationalised in scholarship on the Highlands and Islands as well as in governance. The anthropologist Anthony Cohen examines the notion of community in a way that takes inspiration from Wittgenstein, to “seek not lexical meaning but use” (1985: 12). In
the years since Cohen wrote these words, the word “community” has been put to work considerably in the political sphere in Scotland, and so following its use is a sensible approach. But the community, Cohen tells us, is also a relational concept that is meaningful only in contradistinction to other communities. Thus, the focus of a study of the nature of community is a study of the boundary. Specifically, the symbolic aspect of the community boundary is the object, and crucially for the purposes of this chapter, “to say that community boundaries are largely symbolic in character is, though, not merely to suggest that they imply different meanings for different people. It also suggests that boundaries perceived by some may be utterly imperceptible to others” (ibid., 13). Community, for Cohen, is a malleable symbol which not only expresses meaning but gives us the capacity to make meaning: in its lack of shared meanings across groups, the symbol of community expresses the boundaries between communities. This will be clearly demonstrated in the ethnographic data which follows. Sharon Macdonald, in ethnographic study of Skye, was suspicious of “community” as an analytical unit, rather taking it as a “field to be investigated; and, like tradition, to show it as created within a modern dialogue rather than a fossil of the past” (1997: 9). This is likewise the approach I take to community: how does the community come into being within the prevailing ontological and epistemological frames of the contemporary state in Scotland?

But what are these frames, vis-à-vis the community? In Scotland, since devolution, community management has been at the forefront of planning policy in environmental and other spheres. Such policies and their effects are not just confined to text, but rather they are “productive, performative and continually contested,” producing as much as reflecting social and cultural worlds (Shore and Wright, 2011: 1). For Shore and Wright, policies are “windows onto political processes in which actors, agents, concepts and technologies interact in different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance and regimes of knowledge and power” (ibid.: 2). The anthropological study of policy, they argue, enables an understanding of the ways in which new classificatory logics bring together aspects of society and culture in new configurations, cementing a current regime of power’s legitimacy or creating space for the implementation of new forms of power. Following a Latourian approach, they posit policy as an actant, that is something which can exert agency and effect change in relation to other actors and artefacts in complex social worlds. Their
approach moves beyond a linear hierarchical model and asks not “how does a policy affect people” but “how do people engage with policy and what do they make of it?” (Ibid., 8). When “mapping the topography of a field,” the key in their formulation is to identify all organisations and types of individuals who might be involved in a process of contestation of any policy, conceiving active roles for both those who govern and those who are governed (12). Following this approach, we might say that Community Empowerment is a policy which is in an active state of reformulating social life at this moment.

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 lays out a framework for enabling the Scottish government to tap into the “rich source of energy, creativity and talent” inherent in communities across the country, to “release that potential to create a more prosperous and fairer Scotland” (Scottish Government 2017). Within the act itself, the definition of a community includes “any community based on common interest, identity or geography” (2015: S.1). It establishes, for the purposes of planning, Community Planning Partnerships, which are composed of a variety of community “bodies”: these are “bodies, whether or not formally constituted, established for purposes which consist of or include that of promoting or improving the interests of any communities (however described) resident or otherwise present in the area of the local authority for which the community planning partnership is carrying out community planning” (2015: S. 4).

The promise of more democratic rule following devolution by allowing a broader range of interests to express themselves in policy and governance is based on a non-hierarchical political rationale in which “rigid divisions between government and governed are broken down” and leading to the “previously underused citizenry acting as a valuable resource for government.” Public consultation as such holds a major legitimising function in the politics of devolution. In order for such a governance rationale to proceed, however, it “relies on a construction of the people as ready, able and willing to engage with, and participate in, the transformed political scene in combination with a changed political scene willing to accommodate them” (Thompson, 2006: 460). This ideal is not necessarily borne out in practice. The devolved Scottish government has, for some, worked to continue reproducing class inequalities through everyday practices of nationalist self-legitimisation which obscures “conflicting social interests behind the disinterest of national unity” (Law and
Moreover a study interviewing both regional and centralised national stakeholders involved in a decentralised rural development programme in Scotland from 2007-2013 felt that central and European government still maintained a monopoly of power through regulation, finance and final decision making despite public consultation (Yang et al 2015).

Recent redistributive land reform, deployed under a legal framework including the Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Act 1997, the Land Reform (Scotland) Acts 2003 and 2016 and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, takes place against this historical background of rural underdevelopment and injustices such as the Highland clearances but, rather than adopting a rhetoric of restitution for past wrongs, “is about enabling people in today’s rural communities to be ambitious and to take responsibility for improving their own lives” (Jack McConnell quoted in Combe 2016: 110). The foundations of this movement are in the crofting community, and aim to address the domination of the Scottish landscape by large estates, in “one of the most concentrated patterns of private landownership in the world.” Through this mechanism community landownership has become embedded in Scottish land governance (McMorran et al., 2014: 21).

As Hunter puts it in The Making of the Crofting Community, a seminal work of Highland history which aims to tell the story of crofting from the perspective of crofters, “the emergence of a feeling of community among crofters was itself a consequence of their recognition of the fact that their interests and those of their landlords were mutually irreconcilable” (Hunter 2018, 34). The title of this book, a reference to its Marxist predecessor, E. P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class, emphasises the fact that the crofters as a class of people were actively and deliberately produced (made) by the ruling classes in the 18th and 19th centuries in Scotland. They subsequently found a sense of community emerged from their common struggle. This major study in the construction of the crofting community focuses largely on that community as Gaelic speaking. He recognises major differences in history, politics, landscape and culture between the North East and Northern Isles on the one hand and the Gaelic-speaking Western Highlands and Islands on the other. He then goes on to say that the book is the story of the latter region. A more recent work that conceptualises the region and its community is The Gaelic Crisis in the
Vernacular Community (Ó Giollogáin et al. 2020). Here too, the “Gaelic vernacular community” is defined in terms of its marginalisation at the hands of an English-speaking majority. In this way the “community” in question, whether defined by language or land-holding, is symbolically constructed primarily in terms of its situation in relations of power with outside influence.

A priest who had an active role in the community purchase of the South Uist Estate was keen on the works of 20th century phenomenologist Edith Stein, who, as he explained to me, took an approach to community (and other phenomena) which aimed to describe but never to define. He was kind enough to share with me an essay he wrote on the philosophy of the community buyout at the time of the application, which gives us an insight into the meaning of community as conceptualised by those who transformed the community into a legal entity. The essay argues that “This community has a distinctive identity born from its people’s engagement with the land, the sea, history, and the landowner etc. It has distinctive characteristics and common problems and challenges. Its people share common values.” The support of the community buyout is said to emerge from these common experiences and values, and is thought to “induce a spirit of optimism in the community and will increase its ‘life power’.” The community of the island is to a large degree considered to be a relatively homogenous category of people whose defining characteristics are dependent on hereditary relationships to the islands. This document demonstrates the extent to which the emergence of the South Uist community, as a legal entity, rests on a philosophical underpinning which assumes the community to comprised solely of islanders, not by incomers. Thus, if it has been said that community empowerment and landownership is not directed at the correction of past wrongs from a policy perspective, it is clear that at least to some extent the experience of this empowerment on the ground in Uist has everything to do with the remediation of such injustice. In this way there may be a useful politics in strategic essentialism about the “community” when advocating for resources to support Gaelic or the self-determination of crofters on community-owned estates. However “community”, particularly in this case, is a double-edged sword. Chapman has argued that the historical construction of Scottish Gaels as “a 'community' rich in 'folklore'” was part of their broader characterisation as emotional and not intellectual (1978: 111).
As mentioned, one problem with community is that it imagines a form of homogeneity and, where differences exist, harmony. In Uist, particularly where it comes to environmental governance, there are often clashes between culturally distinct groups and their relationships with the environment. Community Empowerment, as an ethic of governance in Scotland, has an explicitly multicultural aspect. As the act summary states: Scotland’s communities “are made up of people with rich and diverse backgrounds who each have something to contribute to making Scotland flourish” (Scottish Government, 2017).

Critiques of multiculturalism, particularly emanating from education studies, have pointed out its imaginary of harmonious cultural spheres in which everyone is equal in their difference is a kind of liberal fantasy which wilfully forgets the ways in which knowledge is formed in and through structures of power (Steinberg et al., 2006). The project of multiculturalism in a neoliberal world has been to domesticate the uncivil identity-related power differentials of the contemporary world and transform them into economic assets: as a process of citizenisation, social-liberal multiculturalism brought diverse actors into “relationships of liberal-democratic citizenship, both in terms of the vertical relationship between the members of minorities and the state and the horizontal relationship among the members of different groups” (Kymlicka, 2013: 103). Subsequently, neoliberal multiculturalism brought the recognition of difference into the economic sphere: this can be seen in the summary of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act cited above, which sees communities as “a rich source of energy, creativity and talent.” In this model, ideas about addressing structural inequalities in a levelled playing field are replaced with notions of “managing diversity” as a competitive asset (Kymlicka, 2013: 113). This version of diversity is referred to in *The Gaelic Crisis* (Ó Gioillogáin et al., 2020) as an “individualised postmodernist perspective” which constructs minority language use as an individual lifestyle option or competitive asset to the CV rather than a communally sustained identity. Indeed, the community ethos of community empowerment has been related to the restructuring of the welfare state: it is part of a shift of a model based on paternalistic dependence on the state to resilient self-reliance within an “enabling state” (Markantoni et al., 2018). Thus the empowerment of communities might be said to contribute to an erasure of differentials in power among residents of a particular locality in the context of policy moves to construct an economically lucrative and politically unproblematic “diversity”.
This question of empowerment, then, is not a simple and straightforward one, and opinions on the use of the term in community governance vary from outright contempt – as one interlocutor exclaimed with rolled eyes, “oh empowerment and all those bloody words! Empowerment is just a buzzword” – to ambivalence: Carol, a community development practitioner told me: “I can’t quite decide if I like the word ‘empowerment’ or not – I sometimes quite like it as a concept, and sometimes I feel that there’s always someone out there giving you the power.” Inherent then in the act of empowerment is a transfer of that power from one presumably more powerful group to another: there is a certain inequality implied in this relationship reminiscent of patronage. If the job of the community development professional is to channel that power from top-down state power into local community agency, then that professional takes on a particular role of greater power within that process of transfer. The process itself is fraught with challenges. Power transfer takes time, and the exercise of that power takes time: “how we get other people into this process, and ‘empower’ them, is kind of easier said than done” because in general people in Uist are busy with care responsibilities, croft labour, and sometimes multiple forms of wage labour. Additionally there is a reluctance to take on the responsibility of representation, which weigh heavily on the heads of those who take it on. This means that there is a tendency for community management committees to be populated by “the usual suspects”. Within that group of suspects, Carol tells me that “there are some people who don’t really believe in the principles of empowerment and they’re just going through the motions because at the end of the day we want to be able to spend this money. If this is what we’ve got to do to get our hands on decisions about money, then we’ll do it.” Community management is, then, is characterised by discomfort with the contradictions inherent in its imaginaries of power, and by a lack of participation. In what follows, I hope to explain some of the background reasons for this discomfort and non-participation in the words of my interlocutors.

**Community Ontologies: Who or What is the Community?**

As I have suggested, one major problem is the ontological status of the community. That is, who or what is the community? This is a question that I would often put to my interlocutors, and an interview or conversation would hardly ever go by without some mention of the
community. This question was never easily answered. One interlocutor once turned the question back at me, asking “who’s doing the PhD here, me or you?” It might be tempting to say that the “community” is merely a narrative device, a fantastical entity fabricated in academic and political discourse, to be wielded in service of particular ends. However, this is not entirely accurate, and because it is clear that there is something that we might call a community in Uist, or several clusters of communities. The primary issue with this community or these communities is that it cannot stay still long enough to be pinned down by one or other governance strategy or consultation process. The forms of expertise and technocratic power on which those strategies and processes depend require the community as an object of control to have a fixed essence at its core. Once that essence was established it would then become possible to figure out how to best act in the interests of that essential group of people who might be said to comprise the community. Unfortunately, the community does not behave in this way. It is by nature shifting, hazy, and informal. Attempts to formalise it in committees and bodies and councils with rigid boundaries are themselves by nature unsuited to the representation of community, which is in essence (if it can be said to have any essential quality) provisional and intangible.

Or is it? On the one hand, I think it is fair to say that the community is a vague and shifting entity, as it certainly is in the legal definitions of Scottish community governance policy, but on the other for many it is not experienced that way. Rather, for many it is a very definitive entity with clear boundaries between incomers and islanders. If one issue is that the community is in some senses too hazy for rational governance to capture it, then another, thornier issue is that when it does tend to come into sharp focus, its shape is one that is not compatible with the idealised versions of community we find in community-oriented policy. Creamer et al’s (2018) ethnographic study of community sustainable development in rural Scotland found that the majority of participants in these community groups and hence in Climate Challenge Fund projects in the South of Scotland and an anonymised Island were in fact urban “incomers.” In this context there is both a social separation between “locals” and “incomers,” and a feeling that the interests of the latter group (often problematically dubbed “White Settlers”) are disproportionately represented in such projects, legitimising and imposing middle class urban values on rural development (Jedrej and Nuttall, 1996). As such there is a question over “whose conception of ‘the right way to live’ is being privileged
and universalised through ‘community-led’ initiatives” (Creamer et al., 2018: 15). This is a story told over and again as the legitimacy of community buyouts are called into question by the “disempowerment of certain community elements” at the expense of others” (McMorran et al., 2014: 21). The question of whether the presence of incomers at community consultations invalidates the consultation is the core of this question of the essence of the community.

Speaking to a community development worker late in my fieldwork, I decided to test a theory that when people talk about the “community” they emphatically do not mean that to include incomers.

“So when you say community,” I asked, “I get the sense that you mean ‘locals’. Is that right?”

“That’s who I see as the community because it’s their island. They’ve got that historical connection with the land and the sea, and it’s theirs. We’re just visitors. I was talking to someone the other day who’s been here for thirty years and they’ve never been to a cattle sale or anything and was pronouncing Gaelic like Gay-lic. They were criticising me for how I was pronouncing it, as Gàidhlig. Have you listened to the locals? And they’ve been here a very long time, which shows how they form these little groups.”

“Right,” I said, “And I’ve been to community consultations where it’s been all incomers.”

“And this is the problem. To me, the results are not valid, because you’re not actually speaking to the people who you should be speaking to.”

Later on in the same conversation, she spoke on a planning body, many of the members of which did not live on the islands, or did not have a lot of experience living there:

“And I said to them this is supposed to be representing Uist, so who’s on there and she gave me the list, and I said well they don’t live on Uist, so you’re not
representing Uist. You can’t have people who don’t live here. It’s got to be locals, and I don’t class myself in there either, it’s got to be actual locals.”

Thus, as Creamer et al. found, there is a tendency for community governance to be dominated by people who have moved to the islands from elsewhere, or in some cases by people who do not even live there. However in the case of the former group, incomers, the ethos of community management is very much inclusive of them, at least officially. This highlights the rift between legal and lived understandings of community. The Community Empowerment Act provides for definition of community under grounds of geography, identity or common interest. On the ground in Uist, community for the purposes of governance tends to be defined in terms of geography: one volunteer on a nascent community planning forum for South Uist and Eriskay had struggled to define who belongs, and settled on anyone resident in the post code HS8. Following this logic, community consultations are generally open to residents of the area, but those who attend, particularly environmental consultations, tend to be the “usual suspects” of English or mainland Scottish incomers. However, unspoken in this process is a sense that what is actually meant by those running consultations when they say “community” is in fact not “residents” but “Gaelic-speaking crofters”, the precise group that does not tend to form the majority at such events. The problem, then, with the residential criterion is that incomers do not necessarily perceive themselves as external to the community, not always fully understanding that there is a significant cultural gap between them and the actual, unspoken, object of the consultation. This cultural gap accompanies a significant power differential and has a troubling ethnic dimension which makes open discussion difficult. Perhaps this is the primary issue with community governance in Uist: it is not that “community” is such a nebulous and difficult term that cannot possibly be defined, but that it is abundantly clear, in fact, who constitutes the community, who doesn’t, and that this clarity is fundamentally unacceptable under liberal multiculturalism.

One example of the problems of communities-on-paper and felt communities is the island of Grimsay, which is found in between Benbecula and North Uist. A small island on the East Coast, it presents a slightly unusual case in the Outer Hebrides in that it has no machair. It does have several thriving fishing and seafood businesses, as well as more cultural and
community organisations than might be expected for an island of its size. However, this latter aspect of the island is not felt to be owned equally by all the residents. As one interlocutor put it, “you've got Grimsay community association and then you've got the Grimsay community. To the extent that I was speaking to someone from Grimsay the other day, about the Uist local energy plan engagement and she said that people in Grimsay class their closest community hall in Cairinis.” Cairinis is a township on North Uist with a community hall, not far away by car but it is strange that many did not feel more at ease in Ceann na h-Àirigh, the Grimsay Community Association’s hub, which is actually on the island of Grimsay. On a fishing boat off the north coast of South Uist, I was told of the island of Grimsay that there are two sides to the place, the kind of “community” and Grimsay Association side, and then the other people who just live there (which he counts himself part of). He says “some woman moved over from Mull with an idea of what Grimsay should be and about half the people sort of went along with it”. He goes on to say that “places like Grimsay were getting on just fine for hundreds of years without associations, and then these kinds of groups set themselves up and grew without people really even being aware of it.” If the communities of policy come to be defined by shared geography, this is one instance in which such communities might come to make people feel excluded from their own geographic communities, and seek their community elsewhere, as some residents of Grimsay have done in Cairinis.

There is then a mismatch in understandings of the word community as it becomes translated from different contexts. Community workers are aware that the “community” who needs to be “empowered” does not necessarily include all residents, but this is not always understood by people who move to the islands, and in the case of Grimsay, official forms of community prove to be profoundly alienating to the islands’ “indigenous” community. When it comes to the formalised Community of the South Uist Estate, it becomes tricky because the estate comprises multiple communities with different interests and objectives, which leads to conflict, and this has been well documented. But more fundamentally, for our purposes, it comes down to who is understood to comprise the community, and what the role of the community is in the estate. When I asked one islander

\[5\] More on the term “indigenous” in Chapter Five.
on the estate who the community was, he observed that “the answer to that question of who the community is sort of falls back on the community themselves. The opportunity is there to pick up and participate as much as they want, and that is the most stark observation that I make about Stòras Uibhist: the people own the estate, but they don’t behave like they do.” He went on to explain that while, technically speaking, “community” in the “community estate” is comprised by the residents of the estate, and those residents own it, while they might see themselves as part of the “community”, they continue to view the estate as something “other” to them. There is still a mindset and an understanding that the estate is an external other that acts upon the community, or fails to provide certain needs, and in that sense perhaps it is the case that within this understanding of the “community” and the “estate”, the term “community estate” seems to be something of an oxymoron.

One resident of South Uist, an incomer originally from Wales, put the relationship between islanders and the estate in this way:

they doff their caps and then did exactly what they wanted, it's their only way of existing. Deeply ingrained in the people here. The landlord, doff your cap, that's been their way of dealing with it, can't blame them for that. It's understandable. But now in theory we own the estate, and that relic of it is still there.

This approach to local power relations in rural settings is reminiscent of James C. Scott’s (1985) model of peasant resistance in Malaysia, dubbed “weapons of the weak”: in the absence of power to mount sustained resistance, Scott’s interlocutors resisted the power of landowners through acts of everyday resistance, comprising strategies such as foot-dragging, feigned ignorance, poaching, and other small acts of defiance, characterised here in the language of “doffing the cap”, a performance of deference to a powerful landowner. A Stòras board member put it to me this way:

they're responding like oppressed people and they haven't actually - maybe this younger generation, 30 and younger, have - moved out of that zone, although
there’s one or two really vicious ones. It’s that you think you’re in charge and I’m going to make things awkward for you, like they would for the landlord who was, you know, with his plus fours and his big stick and his gun under his arm. They don’t differentiate us from them. It’s still that old resentment, which they had good grounds for being resentful, but actually it’s changed, and we have to change with it.

If the community requires a change in mindset in order for community governance to function properly, it would appear that the estates and their management do in many cases require an update in self-conception. As North Uist incomer who had been involved in various environmental management groups for several decades observed in relation to deer management: “we have to drag them [both North Uist and South Uist estates] out of the 19th century: first of all into the 20th century before we get into the 21st.” A South Uist crofter observed: “That part of the business has generally lost money, but if I go on SU’s Instagram, and look at the grid. it’s all pictures of fish, and shooting, it’s all very sort of traditional sporting estate and I just think really? Is that what the place was bought out for? It wouldn’t have been what I would have done with it. but I’m not in charge, probably never will be.” The South Uist estate then, brings the 19th century hunting estate into the 21st century medium of Instagram, but lacks the utopian vision of 21st century land reform politics, just as it could be said that the crofting residents of the estate remain fixed in a self-conception as an oppressed people.

The community buyout troubles the core binary conflicts of community management in Uist – incomer versus local, external versus internal, native and foreign. If landlords are external to the community then what happens to the community when the landlord is themselves? At this point it should be noted that the membership of the community estate is not the same as the population of the estate: an announcement of local board membership election results reports 488 votes as 57.14% of membership (Stòras Uibhist, 2023), meaning the membership of the estate is 854 while the population of the island of South Uist is in excess of 1800, and the estate itself comprises South Uist in addition to Eriskay and parts of Benbecula. As such, the community estate membership and the “community” at large are not the same thing. To vote in matters relating to estate management, a resident must first
officially become a member of the organisation; that is, simple residence on the estate does not necessary make you a “member” of the “community” in official terms, and many eligible residents are not members of the estate.

In large part, what appears to happen is that the brave souls who stand for election to the board of directors of the estate become channels through which state power flows and as such bear the brunt of local ire, while simultaneously fighting for the needs of the community at higher levels. The closeness to community leaders breeds greater harshness, as one South Uist crofter told me: “And people are always going to be harsher, who would you have been harsh towards when it was privately owned? Most people didn't even know what the owners looked like, whereas now it's people they know, who they see out and about, who have stood on tickets in the public arena, and that brings up this expectation and all that kind of baggage with it.” In this context, an atmosphere of animosity emerges, and the legal change of relationship between estate and islander is not felt on a personal level. In this way, there are two ways in which competing ontologies of community intersect and interact in different ways. As just explained, on the South Uist estate, a new ontological vision of the community as landowner competes with longstanding self-perceptions of the community as oppressed. In the other form of interaction, the lack of recognition of power imbalances between “islanders” and “incomers” in the egalitarian logic of community consultation leads to a situation where parallel communities emerge, the official version dominated by “incomers” and members the unofficial version feeling excluded. In the next section, I seek to examine how these imbalances play out, as I argue, at an epistemological level.

**Community Epistemologies: What does the Community Know?**

A commonly cited problem in island development circles is that the islanders are “over-engaged”: that is, there is a sense of “project fatigue” from a long string of short-term projects which gather data through consultation but produce few results and lack feedback processes. That is, when project workers seek to come to “know” what the problems are and how they ought to be fixed, they are faced with an apathetic population who are unwilling to engage. This has much to do with the economy of development, conservation,
and research work: projects are only funded for set periods, and often this amount of time is not enough to make meaningful differences to the conditions with which they engage. As an addition to this, the short time-scales mean that consultations are necessarily relatively limited in their reach: one project worker expressed frustration with the lack of time and resource required to reach what she considered would be a more representative sample: “we’ve tried engagement but very few people come forward, and I tried doing a survey to a big row of houses, but I couldn’t do every house: I didn’t have time.” In this way consultations are often unrepresentative, or do not lead to long-term and meaningful change. However, there are other reasons why the community, and in this case particularly the crofting community, do not tend to participate in the fact-finding work of community governance and planning. This, I argue, has much to do with islanders’ experiences with the epistemological and pedagogical structures of governance.

The lack of participation of islanders in many public forums is not due to a lack of political awareness or engagement. One islander explained this to me at length: islanders are intensely political, and have to be. Compared to someone living in a city whose needs are more easily met through the market, for instance in relation to public transport because of the high volume of passengers, transport in the island is dependent on friendly policies with deep pockets. The typical islander lives with the threat of service cuts which severely impact their connectivity to the mainland should transport policies turn in an unfavourable direction. As such, islanders are likely to know, in a way that typical urban dwellers would not, who the Scottish transport minister is, even who the civil servants are, and details of the history of the development of policy. The example of transport is a particularly obvious one, but this applies to most public services. However, he observed that while there is a high level of political savvy in general among islanders, there is also a “lack of confidence in articulating their thoughts, thoughts that are 100% completely legitimate, and I don’t know is that the legacy of generations and generations of oppression at times and neglect at others.” This was his theory for a lack of engagement with the politics of estate management, as well as with public consultation more broadly. In the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire tells us that “self-deprecation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalisation of the opinion the oppressors hold of them….Almost never do they realise that they, too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with
the world,” but “given the circumstances which have produced their duality, it is only natural that they distrust themselves” (1993: 37).

The last section pointed out that those espousing the idea of the community governance must be cognizant of the ways in which the voices of each individual, though holding an equal share in the technical imaginaries of community consultation methodology, are not created equal, or are not formed under cultural conditions that enable their speakers to perceive them as such. In particular, in Uist, the fact that this is a multicultural environment is not lost on many: the numerous community development professionals were not only aware of but deeply concerned about this problem. The issue perhaps stems from a lack of recognition of the validity of that cultural difference by residents of the community who do not hail from a Gaelic speaking or crofting background. Knowledge is produced, as we know, within structures of power, and those structures are indeed the very substance of that knowledge – community consultation is means of producing knowledge about the community in order to form relations between that community and flows of power.

Education is crucial to this discussion in relation to both Gaelic and nature. On the Gaelic side of things, one of the core arguments in the *Gaelic Crisis* and the subsequent discussion generated at local and national level was that the narrow focus on education and media as the cornerstones of Gaelic revitalisation have been highly problematic, undermining the use of the language in everyday life and enshrining it in academic and professional spheres. Interlocutors across generations reported finding the experience of Gaelic in education abusive or at the very least jarring. For those of an older generation, this comes in the context of strong anti-Gaelic attitudes within the academic establishment, meaning that the use of Gaelic in schools was punished severely, and many reported “having the Gaelic beaten out of [them],” as it was commonly expressed. Even when Gaelic became available as a secondary school subject, the experience of learning their native language as an academic subject was accompanied with a sense of alienation, and, still, physical abuse. For younger speakers, the teaching of Gaelic in schools had failed them in less openly abusive terms. One man around my own age told me how he had never spoken a word of English before he went to school, but at some point during his childhood his family stopped speaking Gaelic at home. He continued Gaelic classes through his primary and secondary
education but now reports being unable to speak a word of the language. For both young and old, then, having the language they spoke at home taught back to them in an institutional context had been done in a way that had alienated them from it, either in its written form or entirely. Another crofter summed up the shift that has taken place in the following way: when she was growing up English was the language of the classroom, and Gaelic was the language of the playground. Now it is the opposite. Gaelic has shifted to hold academic prestige but is no longer spoken socially: this is similar to the arguments made in the Gaelic Crisis – namely that a focus on Gaelic in education and a neglect of its being spoken elsewhere has resulted in its endangerment as a language of the community. In this way, education and pedagogy have been central to the experiences of language shift in Uist, felt largely as an oppressive force, or one which removes the language from the community and restricts it to the academy.

As regards nature, the good intentions of many working within the community in nature conservation is tempered by a fairly consistent attitude of needing to educate people in order to facilitate their relationship with the natural world. It therefore has a pedagogical element. This is reflected in the ways in which schools are often targeted as key sites for intervention. Freire talks of the ways in which people from the “oppressor class” might attempt to join the struggle for liberation but are still marked by a lack of confidence in those oppressed people which results in a “generosity as malefic as that of the oppressors” – they “truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them” (Freire, 1993: 34).

I think that Freire’s insights here are vital in thinking through exactly how and why community engagement with nature conservation has a tendency to fail in a way that mirrors the problems with Gaelic. Much outreach work takes place in schools, a direct educational intervention to generate a particular mode of appreciation of the natural world. Often, conservation professionals would bemoan the ways in which children spend their time indoors looking at various glowing screens and not outside in nature. This observation would in many cases be mirrored by a concern that the parents of these children likewise have lost, or are losing, a sense of connection with the natural world. As one conservationist
put it, then, the object of community nature conservation engagement work is “about people recognising that what is here really is special and wanting to preserve it, for the legacy of the generations to come”. This observation was part of a conversation in which we discussed the ways in which conservation work, or at least the particular project under consideration, was no longer about top-down assertion of management directives. It was instead about a softer touch, collaborating with the community and “facilitating their connectedness with nature.” This connectedness, however, takes a particular form:

What I’d love to do is have people recognise, say, a really rare great yellow bumblebee and go wow that’s amazing, I must record that, it’s really important, and I know it’s really important to record these things.

As such, the object of such community engagement is not necessarily to facilitate prior-existing relationships with biodiversity, but rather to inculcate a particular form of relation which is compatible with the species-recording form of nature belonging to conservation work, including particular kinds of writing practices. Although not obviously punitive, I think that despite the best intentions of people engaged in this kind of effort, it is clear that the goal of bumblebee recording crofters betrays a pernicious pedagogical framework in which the community is to be engaged in order to shape it around an idealised mode of nature appreciation. Much like the experiences of Gaels with their native language, often community engagement work relating to nature seeks to teach the islanders’ environment back to them in terms that are unfamiliar.

The “community” might be increasingly recognised to be an important entity in decision-making about how its natural and cultural resources ought to be managed. However, the cultural and environmental engagement considered desirable by the professionals designated to speak for the language and the environment in official settings are such that the community finds itself having alien versions of its own natural and cultural heritage taught back to it in unfamiliar terms. While it is a foundational tenet of participatory management that the community has ownership of their language and their environment, there is still a stubborn epistemological power structure in which the community may be
said to be wrong about their own resources, requiring them to be educated, influenced, or simply ultimately ignored.

Knowledge imbalance is well-trodden ground in discourses of participatory environmental governance. Increasingly, gaining funding for community-based initiatives is contingent on environmental sustainability forming at least one of the core values. Within community-oriented land reform, property “becomes increasingly allied with assumptions about moral judgements and what is acceptable in terms of people-environment actions by those claiming property rights” (McMorran et al. 2014, 20). Under the 2003 act, land may be acquired by a community group if it is currently, in the opinion of Scottish ministers, being used “such that is causes harm, directly or indirectly, to the environmental wellbeing of a relevant community” and if the acquisition is “compatible with furthering the achievement of sustainable development” (quoted in Combe 2016, 121). This allows the sale of land for sustainable development purposes without a willing seller. Thus an explicitly moral stance can be identified within community empowerment and redistribution of property ownership. Rather than empowerment of rural communities, the inclusion of the moral framework of Sustainable Development as an imposition on landowners has been argued to be the truly radical step of the community right to buy (Pillai, 2010: 904).

It is possible, then, for communities to have incorrect moral priorities within the framework in which they must appear as a community. For instance, Young et al. (2014) noted the following relating to an inclusive climate change mitigation programme in South Uist: it “indicates that the South Uist community is capable of facilitating a ‘bottom-up’ approach to coastal management” (Young et al., 2014: 33). However, experts in coastal geomorphology considered the approach taken to the project to be the “least favoured and most damaging option” to the “environmental character of the site,” meaning that “the final decision was made in significant favour of the social and cultural demands on the site, with little regard given to environmental considerations” (ibid.: 34). This foregrounds the central issue with discussions of environmental governance, namely a supposed binary between local/practical knowledge and interests and imported/scientific knowledge and interests.
This tension plays out frequently. Here it is helpful to bring us back to my opening vignette and my interlocutor’s complaint that “we’re all on the same side – focusing on different sides only makes the situation turn out that way.” This highlights the lack of understanding held by some residents of the unspoken exclusion in the language of community. If the purpose of community empowerment is in fact empowerment, then this must be done in the recognition that some people occupy a position of greater relative empowerment compared to others. To say that “we’re all on the same side” in relation to environmental management is to ignore this messy reality. It is also to engage in an epistemological domination which casts any dissent as ignorant or misplaced, because within this proposition we are all assumed to want the same kind of objective environmental protection. To take a position against certain hegemonic forms of environmental protection, then, is to ill-advisedly “take sides”, tragically unaware of the real truth that “we” in fact all want the same thing.

I spoke to a community development professional with several decades of experience in Uist who was working on the constitution of a community forum, a requirement for gaining access to lucrative Crown Estate development funding. As Sharon Macdonald aptly describes this process in Skye, it is a “a spiralling process in which the idea of being a community was invoked in order to argue for more facilities to operate as a community” (1997: 199). In the course of this, they administered a survey to the residents of the area to be covered by the forum’s decision-making. This included a list of potential priorities for the forum’s activities. From that list, none of the nearly 250 respondents prioritised climate or environment. The committee, aware of the importance of sustainable development, found themselves with a choice between including this or “reflecting what the survey said” – if they were to include an emphasis on environmental issues they would “not be doing what we’re supposed to be doing and allowing the community to say what’s important to them: we’re saying, ‘we actually know better.’” The decision at the point of my conversation was to “back off on including anything environmental and perhaps address that in the way we structure things”. In this example, then, the community’s lack of interest in environmental concerns as reflected in the survey was taken into account on one level, but on a structural level, it could not be truly integrated. In order for the forum to attract funding, there would have to be a strong environmental underpinning, even if this did not reflect the priorities of
the community. In this way we can see that the community had to be considered wrong on quite a serious level by the process of its constitution as a community.

As seen here, then, community consultation is a process not simply of establishing what the community knows or wants through a process of data gathering so that the needs of the community can be met. It also aims to judge the knowledge against the criteria set out as the particular project’s ideal version of that community in order to fit reality into that vision. Islanders have a long history of encounter with different kinds of knowledge professional – whether that be teachers, conservationists, or development professionals – who have come with a pedagogical agenda with which they attempted to mould the islanders’ relationships with their own natural and cultural heritage. The fact that they do not tend to engage with consultation or attend events has much to do with the practical business of island life, but also much to do with this atmosphere of epistemological inferiorisation to which they have long been subject.

**Conclusion**

What I am expressing here is not new. Consider this extended quotation from a document written in 2005 to summarise the community consultation process for the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council) Biodiversity Action Plan:

> Encouraging people to attend consultation events is always difficult and feedback from locals suggested that an element of apathy and “workshop fatigue” was a problem in some places on the islands. Attendance at the LBAP workshops varied considerably - two out of the six workshops did not run due to a lack of participants, which perhaps reflects these difficulties. Another issue, noted by a number of people attending the workshops, was that only a relatively small sub-set of the local community was attracted to the events – in particular very few crofters attended the meetings. Given the importance of crofting to the delivery of the five plans, it was generally felt that better engagement of the crofting community was important to the success of the plans.
A few people came to the workshops to learn about the habitats and species and did not feel comfortable engaging in the consultation process as they felt their knowledge levels were too low to make a valid contribution. The workshop process does rely on people having a reasonable knowledge and awareness of, if not the specific habitats and species, then at least land management and crofting before they arrive at the event.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar 2005; 49.

Fifteen years later when I spoke to a wide variety of local residents, I heard the same complaints about the community consultation process: workshops are poorly attended, people have workshop fatigue, crofters in particular do not attend, people do not contribute to these processes because they feel that their knowledge is low and their contribution is not valid. This was all known in 2005, and it is known now. Is it the case that those engaged in community consultation are ignorant of these problems, or worse, apathetic about them? No. For the most part, those I spoke to who carry out consultation are fully aware of these issues and do their best to overcome them. To me, it seems as though the problem is that there is a fundamental flaw in the community concept as deployed in policy consultation: the community development, language policy, and nature conservation professionals who consult the “community” can have the best of intentions but the fact is that the “community” in “community consultation” is at best an inaccurate fantasy and at worst a fabrication used to legitimise power imbalances perpetuated by a class of policy professionals.

To say that community is an overly vague and chimeric term is I think to ignore an awkward reality, which is that for the community to be meaningful in inclusive governance it must also exclude. It was made clear to me time and time again that while on paper every resident’s voice was relevant as a member of the community, some were more relevant than others. The Gaelic-speaking, crofting community are the true, often unspoken, characters in the drama of consultation and empowerment. If the point of community governance is empowerment of the marginalised, then those who are already empowered in comparison with the islands’ “indigenous” community are not relevant in that discussion.
They are not part of the community in its ideal form. However, because of the ontological and epistemological problems inherent within the framework of community management, those people who are most in need of empowerment find themselves excluded.

If there are problems with community governance, it must be said that people are not on the whole pessimistic. A change in mindset may be required, but as was suggested to me multiple times, this is likely generational. There is a younger generation who have greater confidence in themselves and see their heritage as an asset. There is also a slow change taking place at the policy level. While it is tempting (and commonplace in anthropology) to assume that a homogenous group of “policymakers” misapply reductive thinking to oppressed rural populations, such an approach obviously falls prey to the very failing that is commonly attributed to policymakers – namely it homogenises a diverse group of actors. As such, while there are inherent problems in Scotland’s environmental governance machine, it is important to note that there is a growing consensus among policy academics that community inclusion is important, and that this has produced positive results in practice: for example, academics from the Science Department of the Scottish Association for Marine Science have argued that “top-down imposition of economic or environmental strategies needs to take into account the differing visions and world-views of local actors and their communities” (Billing et al. 2018, 2). There is some suggestion, drawing on the co-management structure adopted in the Sound of Barra, that:

“policy-makers are recognising and acknowledging island epistemologies and ontologies (reflecting the intertwined relationship between people and place on Barra) together with the biocultural diversity of the Sound of Barra, rather than simply the biological diversity proposed to be protected by the mSAC. At the same time, local people are working towards making their visions visible and workable within the policy environment.”

(Billing et al 2018; 8).

In this instance, Marine Scotland have managed to reframe the interactions between “local” and “expert” knowledge in a way that allows for a more integrated understanding of intertwined natures and cultures. Through “creating a space for sharing world-views” they
reduced the extent to which “expert” scientific knowledge is viewed as an external oppressive force. This may be so that policymakers are increasingly recognising the natural ontologies and epistemologies of island communities (although most of my interlocutors would not agree that this is the case), but I would argue that most crucially they are still failing to engage with the community ontologies and epistemologies. Those people I spoke with who had more than a few months of experience working with Uist communities were very much aware of these problems, but solutions were few and far between. Perhaps the younger generation will have the confidence to overcome the epistemological domination and assert themselves in community governance spheres.

On the vagueness of the definition of Community in the Islands Act, a piece of recent Scottish legislation which makes provision for the empowerment of island communities, and defines a community as “two or more individuals, all of whom permanently inhabit an island” and “based on common interest, identity or geography”, Sindico and Crook take an optimistic slant: “Once again, the Act and the Plan provide an opportunity, not so much to come up with an immediate solution, but to open a fresh discourse that takes these questions away from a merely theoretical and academic debate, into a more practical dimension linked to their implementation” (201: 448). There is then an indeterminate space created which enables new possibilities, much like the Community Right to Buy itself. If those radical possibilities have yet to materialise, this may well be because they require an ontological shift – thinking about policies as worldmaking practice, we can imagine that the community imagined by these policies then does not reflect a pre-existing entity but rather seeks to bring one into being. There is indeed an indeterminate space created in the world-making efforts of Scottish community governance. Whether the world created from this indeterminate space can come into being without entrenching existing inequalities that have led to the formation of the crofting and Gaelic communities respectively remains to be seen. In the next chapter I turn more explicitly to the ways in which community governance structures and their associated problems play out in the production of nature in the islands.

This chapter has set out an important set of problems which will return again and again throughout the thesis as a whole. The “community” is the primary building block in almost all discussions of how best to manage the cultural and natural resources of the islands, and
as such it is impossible to understand these management efforts without first grappling with
the complexities of the term and its internal contradictions. This will be important as I shift
more explicitly into an examination of the natural environment and its management in the
next chapter. These issues will be relevant throughout the thesis, but come into play
particularly again in Chapter Five, where I integrate some of these problems in comparing a
particular discursive strategy, which I call discourses of belonging, and their relative
effectiveness across the cultural and environmental sectors.
CHAPTER TWO

“Farming Nature”: Crofting Communities and Environmental Management

Introduction: What is the real product of the crofting system?

“The economics are subsidy-based so that's the real issue there and crofters are not often sure what it is they're farming. Realistically if you were to follow the money, you're actually farming nature, but you've got this belief from their childhood that they're farming animals for the market.” He pauses to laugh. “But if you look at how the money's divided - SNH through government are funding the use of land in order to sustain nature, and grazing is part of that, but you're actually farming nature. It's a management tool for nature. Most of the Uists are now under Agri-Environment Climate Schemes and you ask any of the crofters and they'll say ‘oh we have cattle and so on,’ but ask any of them and they'll not know why they're doing it.”

As usual for this time of year, the wind is howling outside, building up to a serious winter storm. I’m sitting in a modern, open plan kitchen with Arthur and Janet, a couple who have been living in the islands for several decades. They have close family ties to the place but were both raised on the mainland. They keep a croft, raising Hebridean sheep which they have slaughtered and sell themselves, as well as selling the wool, and engaging in other primary production activities such as fishing. Arthur has a background in conservation himself, and we’re discussing Agri-Environmental Climate Schemes (AECS), which are financial subsidies for managing land in ways that create habitats or provide other environmental benefits. Arthur, with whose theorisation on the nature of crofting I opened this chapter, then turns my questions back to me: “Actually you've spoken to lots of them. Tell me: did anybody say ‘Oh yeah we’re managing carbon sequestration?’”

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6 SNH: Scottish Natural Heritage. This is the former name of NatureScot. The organisation renamed itself in the middle of my fieldwork, and a number of people still call it SNH. In fact, some people still call it the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC), which was a predecessor organisation covering the entirety of the United Kingdom, prior to the devolution of nature conservation to the Scottish government.
My answer is no. While most of the crofters I spoke to were certainly aware of the potential for their land as carbon storage, none of them saw carbon storage or “nature” as their primary product. Given that many crofts are largely unprofitable without environmental subsidies, Arthur poses the idea that really the product of a croft is nature and that crofting is a form of environmental management administered through crofters by the Scottish government via AECS. It is in an interesting proposition, but not a common view. However the idea that crofts might be designed for the primary production of something other than food is not new. The crofting system was developed in the aftermath of the Highland Clearances and in the context of the large-scale reorganisation of land in the region. As Highland lords sought to make their land more profitable, they reoriented their estates towards the production of wool or the manufacture of alkali from seaweed. The small crofts were provided to tenants to enable them to subsist to some extent, but were organised such that tenants would be dependent on wage labour for the landlord in order to pay rent or afford goods such as tea or sugar in an increasingly cash-based society. The result of this was a captive labour force, kept perpetually indebted to the landlord, or a source of migrant labour at a national level for seasonal work in industries such as fishing (Hunter, 2018). As such the crofting system in its inception might be thought of less as a system of agriculture and more of a system for the reproduction of labour. Obviously crofting did produce food, but the object of designing the system in this particular manner and not in another was not efficient agricultural productivity or food sovereignty: rather it was the maintenance of a class of rural proletariat for the landlord’s industry. The true product of the crofting system at that time, then, could be said to be crofters.

In The Making of the Crofting Community, Hunter (2018) argues that the problems that continued to face the crofting community into the latter half of the twentieth century emerged from the fact that crofting reforms, “instead of reforming crofting agriculture...perpetuated, even extended the traditional crofting system. And being dependent on the fragmentation of arable land into a mass of tiny holdings, that system, it has been argued, is quite unsuited to modern conditions” (ibid.: 282). Indeed off-croft income is, with rare exceptions, a part and parcel of life on the croft: those who manage to make a living entirely from crofting do so only by accumulating multiple crofts. An increased
dependency on chemical inputs and imported feed for livestock particularly since the 1970s has hugely increased the financial cost of what traditionally had been a low-input, low-output system. This is largely driven by an approach to development which advocated integration into the “green revolution” and a drive to “improve” unproductive land with industrial farming methods such as deeper ploughing and inorganic fertilisers (Pakeman et al., 2011). Crofting has also long been dependent on various forms of subsidy and changing political priorities have had large impacts on land use patterns as a result, for example the loss of the Cropping Grant in 1972 leading to a loss of incentive for many efforts in arable cropping in the islands (Rennie, 2007). Recent decades have seen an increasing concern for the loss of biodiversity in the face of a productivist approach to croft land, and a shift of the emphasis in subsidies to the maintenance or recreation of habitats for rare biodiversity. This coincides with a time in which the islands are reorienting their economy increasingly towards tourism, an industry that employs many crofters in their additional income streams, and one which relies heavily on the islands’ unique wildlife to attract visitors. In this way, crofting is increasingly drawn into environmental economies.

It is within the context of this observation that I encounter the assertion that crofting is the act of “farming nature” as the funding landscape is increasingly geared towards regenerative agricultural practices. The subsidies make it such that while crofters believe they are farming cattle or sheep, they are in fact farming corncrakes, or lapwings, or machair flowers, or storing carbon. Given that crofting is also a major site of the intergenerational transmission of Gaelic and forms the basis of conceptions of the distinctiveness of island community, it might also be said that a major output of the crofting system is also the Gaelic community, or the island community. This chapter builds on these ideas and adds them to the discussion in Chapter One to examine the ways in which the maintenance of the natural environment in Uist intersects with differing versions of community through crofting. What is the real product of the crofting system? I will argue that the crofting system, as conceived by state interests at least, has shifted in its original orientation as a generator of cheap labour for an industrialising Scotland to a generator of environmental capital. This is of course at odds with many crofters themselves, and I will investigate this tension accordingly. In what follows I look at two modes of the governance of crofting land – AECS and community management. One is generally considered be top-
down and another is a paradigm intended to correct that imbalance by giving communities control over the management of their resources.

On a conceptual level, I interrogate the kinds of nature that are being brought into being here. In *Places of Possibility*, the geographer Fiona Mackenzie argues that community buyouts trouble distinctions between nature and society as well as public and private ownership. Through community projects such as woodland planting, or the community nature reserves of Loch Druidibeg in South Uist and North Uist’s Balranald, the argument is that there is a “reworking of nature of which people are ontologically part” in an oppositional move against the dualistic logics of capitalist enclosure (Mackenzie 2013, 89). In principle, this is a compelling vision for the potential futures of community estates, but as Mackenzie recognises, her account builds a somewhat speculative “geography of hope” which describes a process of “resubjectification” (in a Foucauldian sense) in relation to economy and ecology. In this process, which may or may not actually take place, newly formed subjects reject the distinction between nature and society, between private and public property. Mackenzie is one voice among others that proposes an ostensibly ancient Celtic concept of “dùthchas” as an emic island socio-environmental ontology (see also MacKinnon, 2018 for another prominent voice claiming the concept as a way through environmental conflict in the Highlands). It is a concept that is difficult to translate but interweaves ancestral connection to land along with an environmental ethic that is grounded in Gaelic culture. In many ways, Hebridean ecosystems are ideal places to imagine the development of postnatural subjects who see themselves as truly ontologically embedded in their local ecologies along with their nonhuman companion species. I now explore how this process might be playing out. In this chapter I look to the ways in which different iterations of community – i.e. community as landowner and community qua an organic coming-together of individuals – interact with the islands’ naturecultures - a term introduced by Donna Haraway (2003) to think through the entangled histories of humans and other beings non-dualistically. Naturecultures might be said to be the general condition of the Anthropocene: nature and culture cannot be extracted from each other, and this is nowhere truer than in Uist. However we shall see how this plays out – while it might be tempting to seek in the naturecultures of Uist an example of a non-dualistic ecological
philosophy, I will argue that the nature-culture divide is alive and well, and still causing trouble.

Agri-Environmental Schemes and the Protection of the Machair

In this section I focus on one particular form of traditional natureculture in the islands – the machair - and one of the core ways in which it is managed at a state level. It is one of the iconic ecosystems of the Outer Hebrides, and importantly (perhaps unsurprisingly) is the only term widely used in the biological classification of ecosystem types to find its origin in a Celtic language. This close connection is mirrored in its distribution: the machair is only found in the Western Isles of Scotland, the west coast of Scotland, and the west coast of Ireland, places where Scottish and Irish Gaelic are strongest. It is a coastal grassland defined by its location on a foundation of shell sand, but more importantly when one is identifying machair habitat: “biotic interference such as is caused by heavy grazing, sporadic cultivation, trampling and sometimes artificial draining should be a detectable influence within the recent historical period” (Angus 2006, 8). At its core, what makes machair machair is human cultivation. The machair is thus itself an excellent physical example of a natureculture, defined as it is by it socioecological system. It is “by definition, a dynamic habitat, and change is to be expected,” meaning that “defining the ‘limits of acceptable change’ for the habitat is consequently difficult” and conservation is contested (Angus and Maclennan 2015, 894).

The forces defining the Anthropocene threaten the machair in multiple ways, operating on both local and global scales. First, agricultural practices such as deep ploughing where the humus layer is exceptionally thin has accelerated natural erosion of the soil by exposing the sand dune base underneath. The sand, once exposed and lacking the anchoring of plant matter, makes the system more vulnerable then to severe weather events and erosion, although it should be noted that the machair, being a dune system, is characterised by a degree of morphological dynamism over time. Within the conservation literature it is commonly remarked that while human interaction is what formed and continues to maintain the machair, this activity requires restriction to “traditional crofting methods” (Owen et al. 2000). However the development of these traditions, while initially seeming
straightforward, are of course “greatly complicated by being overlaid by dominant
narratives of ideology, power and politics” (Welstead 2015, 75). Increasing use of artificial
inputs, intensification of sheep farming as opposed to mixed animal husbandry, and
reduction in actively managed land due to ageing tenants and out-migration have
deteriorated the value of the crofting system for biodiversity (Osgathorpe et al., 2011).

The Machair attracts the interests of a number of different conservation objectives,
including bumblebees (Redpath-Downing et al. 2013) and wading birds (Calladine et al.,
2014), for which interventions are often seen as easy wins, given the low intensity of the
existing agricultural system and the comparative health of the biodiversity. As will be
discussed in this section, the Machair and its agro-biodiversity are major targets of
agricultural subsidies, and for many crofters these subsidies are economically vital. However
the machair of South Uist has been designated as of “unfavourable declining” status in
recent years. The use of artificial fertiliser, which favours grain crops, has increased,
replacing the traditional practice of using seaweed to fertilise the machair land, and this is a
major reason for a fall in machair biodiversity (Angus 2009). In the context of this decline,
and the possibility of permanent flooding of some areas (which would produce new salt
marsh habitats), it is possible that “where machair biodiversity diminishes to the extent that
such ‘new’ habitats are of better quality than those they displace”, the “conservation
agencies may be prevented by their remit or legislation from making the type of
contribution to the situation that local people (or the conservationists) wish,” i.e. to save
the machair (Angus 2009). Lorimer (2015) has likened machair conservation, particularly
relating to the corncrake, to an epitome of rationalised conservation based on static ideals
of equilibrium ecology, in which ecological systems are predictable and manipulable. These
conservation efforts aim at maintaining the machair in its current state or indeed restoring it
to a former state, but this is dependent on crofters’ willingness to maintain their own
cultivation practices to some extent frozen in time: keeping up a low intensity system with
few inputs, minimal machinery, and utilising seaweed laboriously gathered from the beach
as fertiliser.
Pretty much all of the machair land, which runs down much of the west coast of Uist, finds itself on a conservation designation of some kind, whether as an SAC, SPA, SSSI\(^7\), or a combination of these. Some crofting land also finds itself on specially designated nature reserves run by the RSPB, namely the Balranald community nature reserve in North Uist, which is a reserve entirely shared by working crofts. It is a key site for the UK’s corncrake recovery programme and is an important site for a variety of wading birds and migrating species. A crofter working on the Balranald reserve told me:

In general people don't understand that machair habitat requires input, it requires livestock to be grazing, it requires cropping, it requires a whole range of activity. If you didn't have crofters, you wouldn't have this fantastic machair and all this wildlife that goes with it, so I'm trying to explain to people why there's all these tractors going back and forth – because they're working the land to maintain it. I think people say "nature reserve" and think that means that nothing will happen, that it's protected, but not realising that protecting it is actually working it, having a whole mosaic of fallow areas and cropped areas and areas that are grazed and areas that aren't grazed. For lots of habitats, grazing is part and parcel of that, and letting it go to wilderness isn't necessarily ideal for wildlife – maybe in some places, but it's finding that balance.

This crofter, who has also worked in biodiversity conservation, expresses an irritation with the kind of hands-off wilderness imaginary, characteristic of European thought about nature (Cronon, 1996), which she encounters in her daily life working a croft on a nature reserve: “protecting it is actually working it”. A core way in which the state and national organisations such as the RSPB aim to support this protection-through-cultivation is by providing subsidies, the state programme falling under the title of the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS). This is administered through the Scottish Government’s Rural Payments and Inspections Division (SGRPID), and largely resulting from EU policies. Arguably these are a space in which we might see reflection at a policy level of the blurred boundary

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\(^7\) Three forms of designated site for nature conservation: respectively, Special Area of Conservation, Special Protected Area and Site of Special Scientific Interest.
between nature and culture because they support the maintenance of particular forms of social nature. The scheme comprises a wide array of programmes through which crofters can receive monetary compensation for managing their land in ways that enable farmland wildlife to thrive. The stated mission is to “[promote] land management practices which protect and enhance Scotland’s magnificent natural heritage, improve water quality, manage flood risk and mitigate and adapt to climate change” (SGRIPD, 2023). This might involve leaving certain fields empty during the spring and summer for corncrakes to breed (e.g. Corncrake Grazing Management or Management of Cover for Corncrake) or grazing the land in particular patterns to provide habitat for wading birds (e.g. Wader Grazed Grassland or Species-Rich Grassland Management). The funds of the scheme are allocated on a competitive basis, and applications are more likely to be successful if they pertain to activities taking place on a designated site of environmental significance, e.g. an SSSI, and SPA, or an SAC. They are thus highly significant in machair crofting: as Angus notes above, should the habitats deteriorate to the point at which an environmental designation is no longer justified, this carries a real threat of loss of income from a particular scheme as the “remit” of environmental agencies would prevent them from contributing financially to croft work.

Experiences with the schemes vary quite widely. Some crofters I spoke to are certainly of the “farming nature” school and manage their crofts in such a way that the livestock are really incidental by-products of their primary objective, which is to maintain the crofting ecosystem. For instance, Brian is a crofter who works for the RSPB on a seasonal basis and comes from a background in wildlife management around the United Kingdom. When he moved to Uist, he bought a croft, and keeps cattle and sheep in native breeds. This is partly because they are hardier than larger commercial breeds and require fewer inputs, but they are also more in tune with the land, grazing less selectively and putting less pressure on the ecological balance. For Brian, crofting in this way is part of a personal mission: “to try and demonstrate to people that the old ways are the best ways, and we’re far better off crofting with the old native stock than the so-called new and improved bigger stock”. In this we find an echo of the pedagogical character of much nature conservation work, where incomers attempt to demonstrate to locals the merits of their own traditions. The other part of his mission, and the primary reason for managing the croft, is “to manage the land for wildlife:
our fields are fantastic for the wildflowers, lots of breeding waders, corncrakes sort of stuff, and it needs grazing to maintain that.”

The agri-environmental schemes provide some support for this, but Brian has noted quite a lot of people dropping out of the schemes because there has been a decrease in the monetary incentives. Brian remains in the scheme because he has a personal desire as an environmentalist to maintain the traditional naturecultures on which Uist’s wildlife depends. However, as he points out, as the benefits decrease, “it depends on why you’re doing it” – if you are participating in the scheme for purely financial reasons, then there is little point. Nonetheless, many hereditary crofters find that the schemes are well integrated with their own traditional practices and find them to be minimally disruptive. Duncan, a relatively rare full-time crofter in North Uist, told me that while the payments have gone down, it makes no difference to their practices. The one drawback is that they accept a slightly lower quality to their silage: cutting in August rather than June means the crops contain fewer nutrients and sugars, and have to be supplemented with bought enhancements. The payments are vital to make any income from the croft, which is otherwise difficult. As he explains:

now with fertiliser being too expensive, I have to reduce numbers, or get more silage, or get more ground. It's a trade-off. And we do require payments to keep going here because we had an audit there for farm assurance and the cattle are losing money without subsidies. I think it was £1.65 a day, going back, keeping a cow in Uist. We don't keep them inside at all - probably in Aberdeenshire is 3 pounds a day - but here we can do it cheaper so it works out at £500 a year, I've got 50 cows, I sell all the calves, so my cheque for the calves is £25,000, so it just about works itself out. And then that's without replacing machinery and replacing the fence, but also if you've got 50 cows, you never have 50 calves, and because you have two different age groups of heifers, they're four years old before you get your money back.

As his arithmetic shows, with rising costs, long return-on-investments, the need to repair machinery and fencing, raising and selling cattle on its own loses money, but the subsidies on top of this income makes the enterprise on balance worthwhile financially.
On the other hand, Iain, another crofter who is himself from South Uist and had a career working in local economic development, found himself alienated by the schemes:

> once they get their foot in the door everything changes then, and you're cutting dates go up from the 17th of June to the 1st of July to the end of July and now some of them on the 18th of August. You say to people I want to pay you for doing it because you're protecting the environment, and then once you're in it and you're getting money they say we want to change this, and we want to change that, and then all of a sudden what you went in for, suddenly it’s a different thing.

He went on to tell me that he felt there was an environmental justice issue at the heart of this. As he put it, islanders have been looking after the natural environment well for years while the rest of the United Kingdom has overcultivated its land and damaged its ecology beyond repair. As he saw it, the restrictions placed on crofters through these schemes were placing an unfair burden on crofting communities, whose environmental stewardship was already bound up in their economic marginalisation in the first place. Having protected island ecologies for so long, crofters were now being asked to sacrifice their livelihoods further in order to maintain that environment for the benefit of the nation.

Donald, a young crofter in North Uist, on similar note, took issue with Arthur’s assertion that he is “farming nature” – he and his father very much see themselves as producing a high-quality animal product first and foremost. When I put the “farming nature” idea to them, they told me that they “want to take pride in what we do, rather than take money to shut up.” There is then for many crofters a sense of being tricked into a situation where they are taken advantage of – indeed this sense of shifting goalposts perhaps provides evidence for the attitude implicit in the AECS, namely that crofting is to be seen as a form of environmental management. Rather than supporting food production, then, the subsidies could be seen as a ploy to manipulate crofting, to keep it fossilised in an unproductive state.

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8 Many of the schemes have a requirement to refrain from cutting grass during the breeding season to provide cover for ground-nesting birds.
in which food production is not the primary aim, to provide monetary compensation rather for the production of nature at the expense of crops and livestock. To suggest that these crofters are “farming nature” is to strip them of their autonomy over their land use practices.

Another common complaint with the agri-environmental schemes is that they lack flexibility and are out of touch with both the needs of individual crofters and with changing and unpredictable economic and environmental conditions. This is a problem in particular as weather patterns are less stable than they were in the past. Donald explains:

There’s not enough flexibility in the schemes I think. If you’re looking at the long range forecast and you’re on the 9th of August and you’ve got maybe 5 days of good weather ahead of you, and you could get the whole thing done. And then you look at the long range and see it's going to pour on the 15th and it might pour for three weeks and the tractor’d be getting bogged down. And you could easily say to people if you want to do it earlier you'll have to take a lower payment, but they’re stuck on these dates and they won’t budge from it. You lose the whole lot if you won’t stick to what they want. I think the way they, with climate change and things like that, with more volatility in the weather they need to be more flexible.

Thus, because crofters are not able to cut their crops a week earlier than the scheme allows, they are forced to accept a lower quality crop as well as the risk of making a mess of their fields following heavy rain. For Donald, there needs to be an understanding of the realities of the place “instead of an expert who's probably never been to the islands probably just deciding the dates.” This lack of understanding applies both to the change in weather patterns impacting the rhythms of the crofting year, as well as to animal behaviour – as Donald noted, the geese had been nesting a lot later than usual in the year that I spoke to him, and similar observations were commonly pointed out to me. With climate change, both animal and human calendars shifting, but the agri-environmental scheme was fixed in a model of the environment which is predictable and stable over time.
Weather patterns notwithstanding, it is also important to recognise the diversity of crofting land. The standard model of machair holding and hill grazing does not necessarily apply to all crofts in Uist, particularly those on the east coast of the islands where there is only one very small patch of machair land in a remote corner of Benbecula. Even within what we might call that “ideal type” of croft, there is significant variation in land quality, exposure to weather, size, etc. As such the inflexibility of AECS takes on a spatial as well as a temporal dimension. Laura, a long-term incomer to the islands with a background in conservation work, who has now taken on a croft, told me about the difficulties of balancing nature conservation and management of the croft for livestock welfare:

Because we've now got a croft and sheep, and we've planted trees, and I really thought I want to keep the lapwings and redshank and snipe but I'm trying to find a way that works for what the sheep need at different times of the year and what the birds need, and I can't do it. It's too difficult. It doesn't work. I don't know.

Referencing her background as a former NatureScot employee who advised on croft management for AECS, I say, “and you're someone who used to advise on this sort of thing.”

“I know isn't that appalling?” she says, “There was me, ‘well you just need to take the sheep out of the field, and you think, ‘I know, but there's strong wind in the winter, and I want shelter, and I don't have shelter in that field, and we've got that boggy bit,’ and you think, ‘gosh how did nobody clock me? How did nobody hit me for being so ridiculous, when I was making these suggestions before’.”

Thus while for some people the requirements of subsidy schemes are minimally invasive and work well with existing practices, for others they diminish productivity, represent an environmental justice issue, or are insufficiently sensitive to the individuality of croft ecologies. Much of this seems to stem from a paradigm which imagines the natural environment to be predictable and generalisable, rather than, as crofters know it to be, lively, unpredictable, and highly localised in character. Nonetheless, agricultural subsidies such as AECS have had and continue to have a significant impact on the naturecultures of the islands, although not always with the desired effects, as various nonhuman actors assert.
their own agency and subvert the intentions of particular interventions. Thus if crofters are indeed farming nature, what exactly is the nature that they farm? Sitting in Duncan’s kitchen in North Uist, he explains how shifting subsidies directly impacted the distribution of deer in North Uist, which is a significant bone of contention with the crofting community, as deer damage crops and cause road accidents:

There used to be a thing called HLCA – Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance. The government at the time worked out that it cost you 10 pound to keep a sheep through the winter and a hundred to keep a cow so there was no limit, and what did people do? They got loads of sheep. So I know some individuals who got a thousand sheep. What they did was they were all on the outer hill, the sheep were grazing the hill, the hill was burnt in sections so it was managed and there was a mosaic of habitats. The pasture was short, and the sheep would come in and the deer were staying out there eating these managed pastures. Now because the payments stopped, the hill has changed so much that you wouldn't recognise it - it's all overgrown and rank⁹. Some people go out on the hill now and just light it and the whole hill goes up, so then you've only got one habitat, and deer don't like it because it's all too barren or too rank so they're coming into the improved pasture, and now they're doing this all the time because that's their nature now, they know to come in.

As Duncan explains, the HLCA subsidy created habitats for wild deer in places where they were not coming into conflict with humans, and following the change in subsidy, people stopped managing the land in the way which it had previously enabled. This causes a shift in the ecological balance produced by one set of subsidies and subsequently the deer come in to interfere with croft land that is being managed according to another new set of subsidy requirements. Here we also find an echo of the slow worms and their hillside disrupted by uncontrolled burns set by “one person with a match.” Now add to this a report of some of the issues caused by those deer, reported to me by Archie the former gamekeeper:

⁹ Rank grassland is that which has not been cut or grazed for a long time and as such is dominated by coarse and unpalatable grass species.
I've got a field there that's under a scheme, I can't put my cattle in that field. I can't put my sheep in that field until autumn, but I can have twenty stags in it. And that's what happens. It's not being grazed, the sweet grass is growing, and because he's got to fence his sheep and his cattle out, the stags come in because it's not being grazed, so the scheme works in one respect and not in another and the crofter is saying why is it ok to have twenty stags on my grass but I can't have my sheep or I'll lose my grant?

In this scenario, the field in question is likely under one of the schemes in which grazing is prohibited for much of the year in order to provide cover for ground-nesting birds. The hills are no longer managed for the deer to graze happily because of the loss of one form of subsidy. Following this, another form of subsidy which inadvertently provides excellent feeding grounds for those displaced deer and is diverted from its original course. The result of this is that the grassland is no longer suitable for the birds in whose interests it is being managed. In this way animals disrupt the best-laid plans of national environmental management efforts. The scheme in question is intended to give oystercatchers a safe place to raise young, and instead it feeds a herd of deer. In this way the AECS produces habitat for wildlife, certainly, but not the wildlife that it targeted originally.

If we can think of this as a form of “farming nature”, the version of “nature” that is being produced in reality is different from that of its imagined ideal. The nature being farmed is in fact one that is unpredictable, unruly, and unheeding of fences and exclusions, rather than one which is predictable and manageable. The pursuit of predictable nature through schemes like this is highly variable in its success – according to some of my interlocutors, it works well, the biodiversity on their crofts is rich, and the disruption is minimal. To others, the disruption is large and the results questionable. It should also be noted that the subsidies in question are vital lifelines in croft economies, and in certain areas (by no means all or even the majority of townships), the communal croft labour that is partially enabled by such schemes is a key site for the intergenerational transmission of Gaelic. In this sense it could also be argued that the product of crofting in this way is not only livestock, or nature, but also Gaelic. Perhaps then a more expansive view of Arthur’s rather dismissive
formulation is that crofting, via environmental schemes, could be considered a means of farming naturecultures. It is of course, given the issues outlined in this section, not the case that current subsidies are geared towards a particular cultural or linguistic sensitivity, but there is inherent in the idea of the agri-environmental scheme a possibility of integrating the natural and the cultural into a coherent system. For this to happen, the experience of crofters would need to be taken seriously, which is difficult within a system that values scientific knowledge production as its primary evidence base.

**Community Naturecultures and the Potential of the Buyout**

There is another governance formation with the potential for integrating the social and environmental in the islands, bringing new possibilities for the kind of nature experienced and lived there: that of the community buyout. If the top-down management tools of national government aim to produce a particular kind of nature – one that is controllable, predictable, measurable – through the community management of the crofting system, then, what kind of nature comes into being? As will be shown, crofting ecologies are largely dependent on communal effort. Based on the insights from the previous chapter about the contested nature of the community concept, how does this play out in the context of the community buyout, and what are the impacts on the natural forms that are cultivated? As the management of crofting through environmental subsidies uses crofting as a tool to produce a desirable state of nature, so the community buyout, rallying around crofting as the core identity of the community, aims to leverage crofting as a means to bring about a certain kind of community in relation to that nature. If the use of crofting to farm nature is ambivalently successful, how does it fare as a means to farm community?

The ecologies of Uist, as we have seen, are largely bound up in traditional ways of working the land. In many cases, such land management practices took place at the community level through shared labour. At times where there were lower levels of youth out-migration, there were larger groups of people available to help with the more labour-intensive aspects of the crofting calendar as it was traditionally managed. That is, the healthier the community and the less top-heavy its demographic age structure, the better the crofting
system within that community functioned, and accordingly, the better the ecosystems depending on that system flourished. One crofter I spoke to told me how his family were able to grow their own feed and save seeds themselves using traditional methods which are labour intensive, because they work as a family across multiple crofts, and as such have the labour power available to them as a single crofting unit. This unit works across multiple townships, where each member of the family may have one or more crofts, all used for different purposes but which feed into the overall family system. This differs of course from the traditional crofting collective structure based on people living in the same township and working together, but maintains traditional crofting ecologies nonetheless. Others rely on methods which are more capital-intensive, requiring the purchase of seed, feed, and other materials, which make the collective work of the community unnecessary for the functioning of the croft, and which also means that certain nonhuman lifeways that subsist in the margins of that collective work now struggle to persist.

For example, an RSPB officer explained to me that there are now only 20 breeding male corn buntings (they’re polygamous so it’s the males they count) left where there used to be 300. Their natural habitat is grassland in Spain and they’ve spread throughout farmland in the UK, thriving from old styles of animal feed production, which left large amounts of seed for them to eat. Now, with the way people bale up silage rather than drying feed in open stacks, that food source isn’t present any more so they’re not doing well. He says that this level of population is probably not sustainable, it’s most likely fallen to below a level where it can bounce back. The old system of drying out cereal crops and threshing them, leaving seed for the corn bunting, is too labour-intensive and as such is not done by most crofters as a result of the loss of the strong intergenerational community.

As one community development worker put it: “The increase in capitalism has decreased the amount of communities working together collaboratively and if everyone is getting used to being a hermit, living on their own, surviving on their own, there could less and less people.” The relationship of inheritance and wage labour to land use change was explained to me by one of the priests in South Uist, based on a thinly veiled portrait of an individual who I had heard mentioned many times. With economic stagnation and loss of population, the tendency for individuals to accumulate crofts by inheritance has increased. What
happens then is that, with crofts scattered around the island, they tend to fall into single-
use parcels of land: one croft might be used for cropping, one for cattle, and then there is a
much higher concentration of cattle in certain places than in others. Speaking of this one
individual who keeps a much large number of cattle on his share of machair land than he is
supposed to, he says: “why? Because he works at Lochboisdale for marine harvest and can
nip up at lunchtime to feed the cows. It’s as basic as that. But the deleterious effects of that
is we lose population within individual townships, we lose the environmental protection of
the common grazing area, and does anybody have the strength or will? For instance a strong
committee with a good clerk who actually knows that kind of stuff? Mostly they don’t, and
they just let it go.” So here a story is told about the economics of inheritance, the
relationship of wage labour to the concentration of land-use patterns, and the
fragmentation of local communities leading to their inability to enforce good practice, with
impacts on the delicate ecological balance of the machair. This also has knock-on effects for
Gaelic, which is largely transmitted through work, crofting being a major sphere in which
this takes place. It is important to note that this is not the case everywhere as there are
townships in which intergenerational transmission of Gaelic does take place through
communal crofting effort.

Much of the labour of croft wildlife management also takes place at a community level, in
ways that are more or less formalised. Some townships, for instance, have rotas to ensure
that the geese are regularly scared away from crops. There are also members of the
community who have the requisite skills and authorisation with firearms who carry out vital
services. This includes shooting marauding deer on croft land or carrying out goose culls,
which in some cases is done entirely for free, for diesel, or for fees so low that they barely
cover costs, or do not cover them. One person told me of his work shooting problem deer:
“it’s a free service, and I could happily live without it, but I would never want to see
somebody stuck.” In this way the work of managing the relationships between humans and
animals in Uist is reliant on the goodwill of community members, and their sense of duty
towards each other. In this case it should be noted that the “community” in question here
might stretch beyond locality and cover entire islands, given that each township is unlikely
to have someone who could carry out this work. But most importantly, the management of
community resources relies heavily on voluntary labour and on good will, which in some cases is wearing thin. Here I quote Archie, a former gamekeeper:

The goose population is exploding exponentially. In South Uist there is only one organisation to blame and that is not SNH - it’s Stòras, because Stòras won't listen. The very people who promised us that with community ownership we could solve the goose problem and it hasn’t happened. When you walk into the boardroom, that doorway arch is a magic doorway: when you walk through it you become an expert in everything. As soon as you sit at the boardroom table you become an expert at everything and for some reason people aren't able to hold their hands up and say, “You know what? I don't have any experience in that, we'd better get somebody with practical experience in.” I just don't get it. It's very easy to blame SNH, they're not the body to blame here though: Stòras are the ones who are supposed to be representing the crofters here...Stòras Uibhist exists to support itself, not the community.

Archie told me of how on numerous occasions he had stepped in to shoot marauding deer on people’s crofts when Stòras had failed to do so. He has taken to advising people to get in touch with NatureScot who will also sort out a problem deer. This is something of a strange turn of affairs in a context where NatureScot, a representative of centralised environmental government has long been treated with some suspicion. As Martha, an incomer who had been living in South Uist for several decades, told me:

SNH are the only people who can do something about it, but nobody complains to them. If everyone complained to them they might have to do something, but crofters don’t tend to complain to SNH. They hate SNH. Most of the locals, it stems from a long time back.

Thus there is a turn towards the centralised for assistance with environmental management at precisely a time when one might expect local solutions for such a problem. Of course, the

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10 Stòras Uibhist: the company set up to manage the South Uist estate after the community buyout.
estates potentially drag their feet in relation to deer management in particular because of
the value of the deer herd for hunting as a revenue source within traditional Highland estate
economies. As Martha indicates, there is a tendency towards low levels of goodwill towards
NatureScot, and a lack of confidence in the organisation’s willingness or ability to solve
problems. The assumption might be then that a community-owned estate might step in and
manage human-animal interactions in ways that serve the interest of that community.
Contrastingly, a move towards reliance on national level agencies to manage such
interactions, as Archie advocates, seems to be a move in the other direction as regards the
community and its elected bodies taking control of wildlife management. In this sense, then,
the operation of community ownership seems to run the risk of entrenching top-down
environmental management based on state agency work, rather than facilitating local level
solutions.

As detailed in the previous chapter, there is a mismatch between the ostensible goals of
community management and the ways in which residents of the islands perceive
themselves in relation to community management structures such as the buyout.
Accordingly, in both the management of flood risk and biodiversity, there a lack of
understanding and consensus of who bears what responsibility. As one interlocutor told me:

of the 37 townships on the SU estate, only 12 have active management committees.
A fella was in touch with me from Stilligarry, complaining about lack of drainage on
the machair that their loch, Loch Stilligarry, was never drained, so they never drained
the outlet to the sea, a whole spiel of accusations against the estate. My advice to
you, I said, is why don’t we dig out the original agreement from 1912. When we got
hold of the agreement, I said what is the first thing you notice? There are no
reservations to the estate to drain any of this. It is entirely the task of the committee
of management for Stilligarry, which you do not have. So you as an individual cannot
go down to the machair with a machine and drain the land, even though you say it’s
affecting you. You have to have a committee of management, who then makes it the
responsibility of all the crofters in the area to go down and clear out these drains.

11 A township towards the north end of South Uist, close to the Loch Druidibeg community nature reserve.
You have to call a meeting. So it was all carefully structured with townships acting in union. The point I am making is that it is an integral part of the management of the whole scheme, which in large part has fallen into abeyance.

The point here is that, firstly, community management of resources is not a new or foreign concept, and its failure to effectively muster the organic community into a functioning political unit is similarly not new. This failure to muster the required capital C Community management structures may relate to economic and social change in the islands which has been undermining the vitality of those lower-case C communities over the past several decades. Whatever the root cause, it is I think fair to say that the responsibility to manage environmental infrastructure has long been delegated, this responsibility has not transferred to a sense of self-determination among crofting communities, who in many cases see the lack of drain maintenance as rather a failure of top-down estate-level management.

This also relates to the management of the islands’ biodiversity more directly, and the relationship of this to poaching. A Stòras board member told me: “understanding that it belongs to everybody doesn't mean you can take what you like. It's the same with fishing: fishing belongs to us now, but that doesn't mean poaching is ok. Poaching was such a game for people so long it spoils it almost for them that you're only stealing if from yourself.” This longstanding history of poaching is echoed in a gamekeeper’s observation to me that a certain amount of poaching is to be expected, and that a good gamekeeper keeps a good relationship with poachers – that way they can get a sense of how much is being taken, as opposed to being ignorant of clandestine poaching. However the community buyout is intended to shift this dynamic. Indeed the estate management section of the buyout funding application imagines that “the Sporting assets will be ‘owned’ by the Community not just legally but also morally leading to a greater care being exercised over these assets and their value being more deeply appreciated.”

There are angling clubs for both North Uist and South Uist, which manage a stock of lakes distinct from those belonging to the respective estates. Of course many people are not members of these clubs and fish anyway, or fish in ways that are technically speaking
prohibited. Both angling clubs use revenue to improve aspects of the fishing ecology and purchase boats. A member of the South Uist club told me that there are many people who fished their whole lives with bait, which is technically against the rules, and refuse to join the club, which again is a technical requirement which the club is charged with trying to enforce. People see the club as a money-making scheme and ask why they should bother joining the club since they’ve been fishing in these places their whole lives? He counters that the club is not about making money but about improving the fishery, but concludes that ultimately it is not possible, advisable, or worthwhile to try to stop people from fishing in their own ways. An active member of the North Uist club, when asked about this, told me that it relied on a change of mindset: “if you come around to the idea of seeing that the locally based angling club is your community club rather than some outside body that’s come in and is trying to exploit it you might see it differently.” This change of mindset, it seems, has yet to occur, and individuals maintain their traditional stance towards the institutionalised management of nature, even if it is ostensibly now done by members of the community.

Furthermore, there is the question of community ownership of land and its relationship to perceptions of the islands’ geography and ecology as a single dynamic system. This was explained to be in terms of the drainage system on South Uist, a system of canals that enabled the flow of water through the landscape. Here’s Carol, a community development worker whom I mentioned in the previous chapter:

I was trying to explain what happened when Stòras took over: it was a relatively benign ownership, the five guys who owned the South Uist estates. By and large they left the crofters to get on with crofting and charged them tuppence ha’penny\(^{12}\), and then community ownership comes along and there was thing about the integrated drainage system, because 100 years ago here there was a widely regarded state of the art integrated drainage system that the owners had set up and over the benign indifferent era of the landlords, crofters neglected stuff or blocked things up deliberately or let them be blocked up and gradually the integration became not so

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\(^{12}\) A reference to the nominal rents charged by crofting estates to their tenants.
integrated, and the first board said they wanted to restore the integrated drainage
system and set about doing that, but that of course that involved going to the
crofters and saying could you unblock that, could you do this, and they said who are
you telling us what to do for the greater good? They would say “it would be really
good because by blocking that up, your neighbour's place is getting flooded.” [Here
my interlocutor adopts the posture of a crofter responding to this request:] “And?”
And it seemed to me that environmentally, we’re still nowhere near integration. I
don't know how seriously it was taken or did people just feel fighting the crofters
was too much like hard work in the end.

There is a mismatch then between scales of community. The community of the South Uist
Estate could be said to benefit as a whole from the restoration of the drainage system, but
this became tricky once the blockages allowed by “benign neglect” become vital for
management of individual crofters’ land, or the collective lands of townships. The Estate
Community’s environment then comes into conflict with township community
environments. Where the Community Estate makes an effort to revitalise a large
infrastructure project that allows for the drainage of land so that the islands’ valuable
naturecultures as a whole might prove more resilient to climate-related flooding, this is
resisted by the individuals or individual townships that form part of that overall island
community. In this way efforts to integrate land management across the island struggles
against a lack of imagination of the island as a single socio-ecological system.

The dissolution of boundaries between public/private and nature/society that are promised
by Mackenzie’s vision of community ownership cannot be said to have emerged in South
Uist. Former community efforts managed agricultural systems in ways that supported corn
buntings, or island-wide drainage systems increased the resilience of the socio-ecological
systems of the islands to climate change. These practices could have blurred the boundaries
between these sets of binaries which underlie a capitalist worldbuilding practice. However
there are now significant barriers to this sort of activity, including economic constraints on
time-consuming crofting practices as well as a shift in islander subjectivity, or rather,
drawing on my arguments in Chapter One, a lack of such a shift: it may be that remaining
antagonisms towards the estate, experienced as an external entity to the community, is in
some ways preventing the development of an integrated socioecological system of which individuals see themselves ontologically as an integral part. Perceived failures of the community estate to manage wildlife effectively potentially entrenches reliance on top-down management structures, and other community structures such as angling management clubs are not perceived to have any authority. If it might be tempting to talk about the islands as offering an example of a non-dualistic natureculture on an abstract level, it is difficult to find evidence of this in practice. Additionally, efforts to bring into being the kind of community imagined by community governance structures do not quite work out in practice.

**Conclusion**

If and when the possibility of an integrated natureculture can be attained is a question of how firm the grip of nature-culture dualism remains on Scottish minds. While islanders themselves have a closer understanding of the environment in question, I think based on my lengthy conversations with crofters, fishermen, and other Gaelic speakers it would be inaccurate to suggest that within contemporary Gaelic culture there is a non-dualistic ontology of nature to be found – despite what those who preach the gospel of dùthchas might have us believe. In my experience, not a single interlocutor invoked the concept of dùthchas when explaining their relationship with the land on which they lived and worked.

In May and June of 2020, I conducted a series of semi-structured phone interviews with a range of people involved in wildlife management in the islands, including an employee of the RSPB, two NatureScot employees, and two gamekeepers. The aim of these conversations was to get a sense of the ways in which the lockdown was impacting on the work of managing the islands’ natural environments, and the conversations were illuminating on the subject of the nature concept. As of Phase 2 in the easing of restrictions, almost three months after they were suspended, some forms of species control had resumed for species deemed non-native or invasive. For example, Mink pose a serious threat to ground-nesting birds if left unchecked. While control of this population had resumed, the spring lockdown had coincided with their breeding season, allowing them to proliferate in peace. The team in charge of mink control have in ordinary circumstances only
been able to keep the population at bay rather than eradicating it, so a few months of inactivity has potentially set them back in a significant and costly manner.

Drawing parallels between the Covid-19 pandemic and issues of invasive species control, one member of the NatureScot staff speculated that “the reason why we’re in this situation is that we stressed nature. As a species, humans have...abused nature, and we’re living so close to it, that nature is...having to respond in order to survive, and that’s having a deleterious effect on us humans.” In this imaginary, we see a zoonotic disease emerging as a sort of act of natural aggression as part of an ongoing adversarial relationship between human and nonhuman worlds. However given that “there’s very little that’s natural in the world anymore,” he feels that:

“man has a requirement to manage the landscapes and habitats he lives within because he’s got the power to change them. So we actively have to manage the entire planet, which is something that we’ve come to recognise but our actual ability and our desire to actually do that in a proper way is lagging behind our recognition that we have to do it.”

So for some it seems as though management of the environment, while problematic and imperfect, is the role the human must play. Here we can see that Capital-N Nature has persisted within the minds of some conservation professionals as an external and knowable entity which humanity must manage and manipulate. On the other hand, Eva, an RSPB warden, saw this as an opportunity to reorient ourselves towards the natural world, in the face of an epidemic that has been “cataclysmic” for humanity but has allowed animals to occupy spaces according to their own needs:

“We don’t always have to think of nature as our enemy. That we can actually slowly and sensitively work together, and I’m so hopeful that this is actually what we’ll be left with, that we need each other. We need nature – well actually, I say that but we need nature much more than nature needs us, and when we were locked in our houses and nature just went, ‘Woo-hoo! It’s ours again!’ ’ Hopefully that’ll be a little humbling lesson for us, that we’re just not the – I’m losing my
words! – but basically the planet will be just fine without us and that’s very
inspiring.”

For Eva the humbling effect of an epidemic such as this can allow humanity to reorient from
adversarial and anthropocentric relationships with nonhumans. There are within her
account whispers of separate Nature, but a desire to find another way of integrating it into
the work of conservation.

All of this is to say that there is a compelling argument to be made for the radical potential
of naturecultures as a means to frame the socio-environmental problems of the islands in
holistic terms, but the nature-culture binary remains strong. In the context of a threatened
linguistic and cultural heritage, it seems as though a critique of the separation of nature and
culture is an act of intellectually shifting the goalpost: my interlocutors are struggling to
maintain a distinctive cultural heritage and sometimes feel threatened in their efforts to do
so by invocations of nature as a supremely important object of preservation. What then
does it mean to say that nature and culture are not separate after all, when their lived
experience seems to say otherwise? Nature itself remains a powerful discursive tool in the
negotiation of worlds, in ways that culture does not, as we will see in the Chapter Five which
examines questions of belonging along two core concepts: invasiveness and indigeneity.

The outlook may be bleak if we imagine a shift into a new form of consciousness for the
Anthropocene which dissolves barriers between nature and culture in the popular
imagination. It can easily be argued on a theoretical level that Uist’s biological and cultural
diversity are intertwined – that they co-constitute each other and largely share similar fates.
When communities dwindle, the natural environment suffers as much as the Gaelic
language does. Capital N nature remains a force to be reckoned with, and this can be seen
to be alive and well in the modes of conservation work, such as AECS, which have potential
to integrate the cultural into the natural and vice versa but in practice maintain a version of
technoscientific nature which has in many cases negative impacts on both the nature it
seeks to protect and the culture of those whom it would ask to protect that nature. If we
think about the worlds that these political projects (the community buyout and state
farming subsidies) are producing, the versions of nature that they produce are not particularly inclusive of anything beyond a scientific outlook.

The farming nature analytic also misses the key point that this is not how crofters see their work. The point here is that crofting has historically been moulded to serve particular interests: it produced a labour force dependent on a landlord, and now it is producing a labour force dependent on environmental subsidies. Both situations assume a sort of false consciousness among the crofting community. What crofters themselves (excepting the group that croft for entirely environmental motives) believe they do is produce food, and maintain heritage, maintain communities. The crofting system might not produce natures or communities in the way that AECS or professionalised community development practices imagine, but it does still, as it always has, reproduce a population of crofters who take pride in what they do. Much like in the previous chapter, where I argued that conflicting ideas about the meaning of community are a barrier to truly inclusive community management, the kinds of nature envisioned by different management styles and the place of the human within those management styles jar with everyday understandings on the part of island communities: governmental AECS schemes co-opt crofting as an environmental management tool when it is understood on the ground to be a food production practice, and they also assume a version of nature which is predictable, when crofters know that it is not. Likewise community management rests on an ideal that with community ownership of the land there will come a relationship to the estate and its nature that is less dualistic and more rooted in care and appreciation, which has not come to pass due to a number of factors, not least among them the problems discussed in Chapter One. Crofting nature falls somewhere in between two configurations: it is not consistent with the techno-scientific managerial nature of the neoliberal state, nor is it the non-dualistic natureculture of the dùthchas model. Either way, the crofting community is co-opted within management structures and conceptualised therein in ways that clash with crofting self-understandings as food producers, namely as producers of nature or producers of a new paradigm of engaging with the land.
CHAPTER THREE
“The language that they think in their own heads”: Writing as Preservative Practice

Introduction: a dark and stormy petrel night

It is a dark, moonless midnight in late August. I park my car at Ardmichael cemetery in Stoneybridge, in the middle district of South Uist. I have arranged to meet my interlocutors, Evelyn and Tom, on the headland behind the graveyard, but I can’t make out anything from here. I have patchy mobile reception, so my only option is to wander in the darkness until I find them. I shrug and head out around the north end of the graveyard and I’m halfway down its western wall when I hear a loud, chaotic mix of chirps, whirrs, and squeaks. Shortly after this I can see a strange structure lit up in red light out at the end of the headland. Hung perpendicular to each other between three metre poles are two large nets, twelve metres long each – the structure gives the impression of two sides of a tennis court – with loudspeakers positioned nearby, pointing out to sea and playing the unearthly sound that lured me there: a recording that mixes the calls of Leach’s Petrel, Swinhoe’s Petrel, and the Storm Petrel.

It is the latter bird that takes our interest tonight. The Storm Petrel is a mostly black seabird with white patches on its wings and rump. It is on the UK’s Amber List, meaning that its conservation status is of moderate concern. Tonight we are working on a population survey, a form of monitoring that is crucial in the conservation of such species. The red light, combined with the disembodied sounds of a breeding colony, produce a surreal and unnerving atmosphere but it’s less disorienting and disturbing for these birds than white light: they only come onto land at night, an adaptation to help reduce predation while they are at their nesting sites. Red light does not disrupt the birds’ perception that it is night-time but it allows us humans to function within our own sensorium – it is thus a spectral compromise between two species’ sensory requirements.
Tonight is just one of many nights this summer that Evelyn and Tom spend here with their nets and lights, blaring birdsong out to sea in the hopes of luring in Storm Petrels so they can document the resident population for national biodiversity databases. We spend a few hours going back and forth from the makeshift field office in the boot of their car to check the nets for birds, which become tangled up in them as they fly inland. Carefully, with the help of red headlamps, we untangle the birds from the mesh and hold them firmly while they are weighed, measured, and aged. Working with the birds requires a delicate balance of gentleness and firmness. Show the bird that you are in charge of the situation so that they submit to your interference in their night, but do not harm it or spook it more than necessary. If the birds have been ringed already – that is, if they have a metal ring attached to their leg with a unique code which identifies them in a central database – then the number of the ring is recorded and submitted to this database, which builds a biography for each ringed bird based on submitted records of various encounters with the bird over its life. If it is not ringed, then a ring is attached and the bird will be registered to the database. Once the bird has been documented, it is released. At around 3am, having documented a total of fifteen individuals, we call it a night.
Another way I might tell this story is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Scientific name</th>
<th>Hydrobates pelagicus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Taxon author</td>
<td>(Linnaeus, 1758)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Common name</td>
<td>Storm Petrel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Species ID (TVK)</td>
<td>NBNSYS00000000236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Taxon Rank</td>
<td>species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Occurrence status</td>
<td>present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Start date</td>
<td>19/08/2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>OSGR</td>
<td>NF72E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Latitude (WGS84)</td>
<td>57.273881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Longitude (WGS84)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Recorder</td>
<td>Withheld</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Individual count</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Identification verification status</td>
<td>Accepted - considered correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Basis of record</td>
<td>HumanObservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Dataset name</td>
<td>Birds (BTO+partners) 2019-2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Data provider</td>
<td>British Trust for Ornithology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Data provider ID</td>
<td>dp29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Institution code</td>
<td>BTO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Phylum</td>
<td>Chordata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Aves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Order</td>
<td>Procellariiformes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Hydrobatidae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Genus</td>
<td>Hydrobates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>OSGR 100km</td>
<td>NF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>OSGR 10km</td>
<td>NF72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>OSGR 2km</td>
<td>NF72E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Stormy Petrel Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State/Province</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Vitality</td>
<td>alive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is a modified form of the way in which this encounter will become entextualised in the National Biodiversity Network Atlas, an open access resource which compiles the data from a variety of other biodiversity recording services around the United Kingdom. This will take place after being compiled by the county bird recorder and sent to the Scottish Ornithology Club, then to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), who may eventually share it with the NBN. This data is modified for several reasons. It is in part because the data from that particular night has not yet been shared with the NBN, as the BTO have currently only made data up to 2019 publicly available on the Atlas. As such, I have reverse-engineered the entry from fragments of other records from earlier years. It is also in part a reflection of my manipulation of the data to tell a particular kind of story about it. Just as the database has its conventions about what information is relevant and what is not, so does my ethnographic account: the original records I worked with contained 56 lines, many of which were blank due to gaps in the data, contained unique record ID numbers which do not yet exist for this encounter, or were repetitious, and so I have left them out. I have left 30 lines of data in the table to provide a sense of the storytelling conventions of national biological recording.

What do we learn of this encounter between three humans and fifteen birds through a text like this? That there were 15 birds (line 12), that they were present (line 6), that they were alive (line 30), and that they were recorded by human observation (line 14). The names of the recorders are left out to protect the anonymity of the BTO’s recorders (much like they are anonymised in my own account). The only human name which does appear is that of Carl Linnaeus, the 18th century Swedish taxonomist after whom the Latin binomial taxonomic system (Linnaean Classification) is named – along with the name of the taxonomist responsible for their naming, data points 19 to 24 also tell an evolutionary story of how these particular birds came to be the way they are, and the relationships they have with other forms of life (more on taxonomy in the next chapter). The grid references provide a more precise location, for those able to interpret them, than my own vague direction to park your car at the graveyard and wander around in the darkness.
The other named entity in this encounter is the BTO itself, and this is perhaps where a certain kind of human story might be told. The fact that the data comes to the NBN through the BTO tells of a certain text-making culture in the Outer Hebrides: that of biological recording. The data travels to the NBN via the BTO, from the County Bird Recorder, who as might be expected, receives, collates, and publishes all the recorded sightings of birds in the islands. Recordings of all other forms of life come to the NBN directly from Outer Hebrides Biological Recording (OHBR). The OHBR records for the time of this encounter are, at the time of writing, available on NBN, but do not contain any records of birds. The fact that records for storm petrels would come, then, from the BTO and not the OHBR tells a human story of national infrastructures of the datafication of nature – that is, of the peculiar delineation of birds and bird recorders from, say, different forms of algae or moths and their respective enthusiasts.

Within an ethnographic genre, it might be tempting to say that this dataset “thins out” the rich, embodied, sensory encounter between myself, my interlocutors, and these wild, nocturnal animals. The writing style of this data table does everything it can to fix certain kinds of facts – to quantify the encounter and remove all sense of its quality. The literary conventions of the genre of biodiversity spreadsheets remove the “modality” of the encounter between human and bird, and represent such data as irrelevant – thus it becomes a convincing text based on its removal of all traces of its attempt to convince (Latour and Woolgar 1987): the voice of the author is removed, and the text attempts to disappear as such, striving to achieve a state of pure information without writerly artifice. But what if we were to take it as a cultural representation of the world in which humans and birds co-exist, as much as it resists this categorisation through its methodical language of enumeration, anonymisation, and speciation – can quantitative data tell qualitative stories?

In the course of my fieldwork, much of the texture of the everyday consisted of producing texts or centred around relationships to writing and the written word. I spent days shadowing conservation fieldworkers as they gathered data for population reports or attending inspections to ensure that actual croft boundaries and land use patterns corresponded to their textual representations submitted in paperwork. I attended community consultations whose object was to produce a text that would represent the
interests of the islands’ residents, to ensure that action plans and policies were reflective of those interests. I had multiple conversations with a variety of people about the usefulness (or not) of such documents, or about their translation into Gaelic and the efficacy of those efforts. I monitored the prolific textual cultures of local Facebook groups as users produced crowd-sourced archives of everyday life. People in Uist, as elsewhere in the United Kingdom, are constantly producing written texts, and they also reflect on those texts and their aesthetic value, their relationships with lived experience, their reliability and authority, their potential to drive change.

For now, I dwell on textuality itself, as I trace attitudes towards writing and its importance for the preservation of the linguistic and natural landscapes of Uist. If my central preoccupation in the project is the ways in which the islands are brought into being through linguistic practices, then it is worth spending time thinking about the forms in which such practices appear. While much of the work of linguistic worldbuilding is accomplished in speech, I would argue that the most potent moments in this process are those in which lived experiences are translated into written form, and when these written forms are deployed in different contexts.

By examining the everyday literacy practices of the islands, such as form-filling, social media posting, keeping minutes at meetings, and biological recording, I examine how the written word is deployed in everyday life to reinforce or resist the world in its current forms. I show that relationships between written and oral forms are complex and shifting: at times the written word is regarded with suspicion as a barrier to the authenticity of expression, at times a vital component in frameworks of preservation. On a surface level, it might appear that text is venerated within the sphere of nature conservation, with its prolific gathering and manipulation of data, and the oral tradition venerated in the Gaelic sphere. While the latter might largely be true, it is also the case that the written word is at times treated with scepticism by those engaged in the preservation of nature, that this sphere contains its forms of oral culture, and the orality of Gaelic is itself not independent of written text. In both spheres, the writing of texts is deployed as a means to protect the phenomenon being represented, but also in both there is a sense that the text might also distort or damage its object and thus the writing of texts becomes a site of contestation. I present some voices
from the contemporary Gaelic world in order to show the manifestation of the orality-literacy divide and its relationship to concerns about language shift. I follow this with some examples from the everyday written texts of road signs and forms in which Gaelic appears. Through these examples we see how the place of Gaelic in contemporary Scotland is negotiated through these everyday texts and the discourse surrounding them.

I first examine some approaches toward the written word in the social sciences. Then I examine the curious relationship between Gaelic and the written word, examining the way in which Gaelic has come to be constructed as an oral language and the connection between this construction and ideologies of language shift. I follow this with a comparison between the attitudes towards writing held by Gaelic speakers and people involved in biological recording and nature conservation. What kind of power does the written word have, and does it matter that it is written and not spoken? Why do people produce written representations in the way that they do? How do these representations relate to the experience of reality and what effects might they have on that lived reality?

**Writing, Speaking, Texts**

While anthropology has tended in a general sense to concern itself with the oral, ethnographic studies of literacy have examined the roles of reading and writing in everyday life. Ahearn (2012) has characterised anthropological approaches to literacy as belonging to two camps of either ideological or autonomous. The autonomous studies, exemplified by Jack Goody and Walter Ong, operate along a model of literacy as an asocial phenomenon, an autonomous variable, which divides societies according to a great divide between literate and oral. Ideological studies argue that literacies must always be seen as plural practices with local specificities and emergence from social and political structures. These are organised around ideas of literacy practices and Heath’s concept of “literacy events”: these are “situations in which written language is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies” (1982: 50). In Heath’s own work, the literacy event in question is the children’s bedtime story, and indeed much of the literature inspired by her work has been in an educational or childcare-related setting, e.g.
Pahl (2014) on the home literacy practices of British Asian young people as “sites of transformation, resilience, or resistance”. However, there have been extensions to other anthropological topics including health and development, e.g. Papen (2008) on how pregnancy is a textually mediated event or a study of the role that everyday literacy practices play in social movements in South Africa, in which mundane texts such as lists become central in the negotiation of agency and production of meaning (Kell, 2008).

Some approaches decentre the writing in the consideration of “text”: for example, taking text via its Latin root texere, to weave, Barber suggests that text is more generally a “tissue of words”: an “utterance (oral or written) that is woven together in order to attract attention and to outlast the moment” (Barber, 2009: 1-2). In fact, Barber goes on to say that an assemblage of musical notes or visual images might be considered a “text”. For Barber, what defines a text is that it is constructed in a way that makes it available to be detached, quoted, repeated and critiqued: it is this production for the purpose of interpretation by an interested observer that distinguishes them from other forms of utterance. Contrary to Barber, I argue here that it does matter, at least to my participants, whether texts are written or not: we might argue on an abstract level for an expansive category of the text but as will become apparent, in practice such expansiveness occludes the specific potency of the written word in the lifeworlds of my participants. Goody’s “literacy thesis” (see Goody, 1977), which posits a strong delineation between oral and literate societies has been both unfairly characterised as maintaining a stricter binary than it really does, and also justly criticised for some more problematic ideas such as its tendency to view literacy as intrinsically linked to qualities such as logical thought and abstraction. However it has been noted even by critics of his work that the literacy thesis stands strong particularly in relation questions of preservation (Halverson, 1992), and this is where I find value in it for my purposes, in a study of the modes of preservation of nature and Gaelic. It is in this sense that I share Goody’s insistence on the importance of the “mode of communication”, alongside that of his critics on the social, cultural, and political embeddedness of the ways in which that mode operates or is operationalised.

Similarly to Barber, for Silverstein and Urban, the production of texts, or entextualisation, is a means by which culture is transformed and becomes shareable across temporal and
spatial difference, rendering the particular object of the entextualisation as separate and detachable from its original context (Silverstein and Urban, 1996). This process is bound up with the power differentials across users and producers of texts, such that politics becomes “the struggle to entextualise authoritatively” – i.e. to produce textual representations that are considered to be true – as well as “to fix certain metadiscursive perspectives on texts and discourse practices” – i.e. to socially reproduce ideologies about writing as the carrier of truth and authority (ibid.: 11). One key way to “entextualise authoritatively” is to make use of the “metadiscursive” practice of writing within genre: “genre is key to textual organisation, to the interaction between composer and audience” (Barber 2009: 30).

Furthermore, "the genre, as a metadiscursive label for a class of recurrent entextualisations – each with its own interactional and denotative facets – is what appears to give substance and continuity to the social interactions in which the texts are produced, and, therefore, to the broader social order" (Silverstein and Urban, 2009: 8).

In some cases the most effective way to convince a reader of the authority of one’s text is to work within genres that efface their own production within genre, their disappearance as text. This is best illustrated in scientific writing. Latour and Woolgar discuss how the work of a laboratory consists largely of “performing operations on statements” (1987: 87) – thus scientists become active readers and writers of texts, while representing themselves as mere discoverers of facts: “a fact is nothing more than a statement with no modality [e.g. maybe, established, not confirmed] and no trace of authorship” (Ibid.: 82). Thus “the function of literary inscription is the successful persuasion of readers, but the readers are only fully convinced when all sources of persuasion seem to have disappeared...a text or statement can thus be read as ‘containing’ or ‘being about a fact’ when readers are sufficiently convinced that there is no debate about it and the processes of literary inscription are forgotten” (Ibid.: 76). Part of the project, then, is to examine such inscriptions and the work that they do in social context. How successfully is this achieved in practice?

Texts are forms of action, utterances used to accomplish particular things. They are social facts, but what distinguishes them from social facts in a general sense is that they are reflexive in that they “are part of social reality but they also take up an attitude to social
reality...they are part of the apparatus by which human communities take stock of their own creations” (Barber, 2009: 4). Barber’s approach is not to see texts as mere “windows” onto the terrain of social activity which they represent, but rather to see them as that very terrain themselves. That is, if a “text is to ‘tell us’ anything about a society, social experience, or cultural values, this can only be through its specific textuality, its specific way of being a text – not by by-passing it” (ibid.: 13).

This may sound similar to discourse analysis, in its concern for the rules and power structures which determine what appears in the discursive domain, that is, what gets written down and who has access to these texts and their use. What sets this apart draws from De Certeau, who sets out his own divergence from the Foucauldian project in The Practice of Everyday Life: “the goal is not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of ‘discipline’” (De Certeau, 1984: xiv-xv). That is, rather than looking at the disciplinary structures of the formation of text and the rules of what can or cannot be said, the goal is to look at the ways in which texts circulate and the meanings they have for people in their daily activities.

In thinking about the everyday, we might draw inspiration from Veena Das’s “politics of the ordinary as a stitching together of action and expression in the work of bringing about a different everyday...the birthing of the eventual everyday from the actual everyday” (Das, 2020: 58). Here political action is not separated from everyday activity into a rarefied or elevated field of capital-P Politics: through everyday action one aims to bring about a more desirable ordinary lived reality. For a politics of language shift and environmental change this is a crucial insight: language is maintained through everyday usage such that speaking it or writing it becomes a political act. Climate change and biodiversity loss are driven by individual action so that every act of consumption or choice not to consume becomes a part of broader forces modifying the world. By focusing on the everyday literacies of people in Uist, then, we can see how small literacy acts might form part of the ways in which people strive for a more culturally or environmentally desirable everydayness.
This necessarily applies to reading as well as writing. In a political situation described by De Certeau as a “semiocracy”, he argues that the “binary set production-consumption” could be substituted by “its more general equivalent: writing-reading” – inherent in this is an understanding of consumption as an actively productive activity, rather than a passive one. Thus the act of reading is itself productive through “the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance” (De Certeau, 1984: xxi) – in this way text becomes “habitable”, available for appropriation and subversion by the user in the same way as physical spaces might be.

Texts are not themselves merely manipulated and reinterpreted, but contain in many cases the “illocutionary force” of the performative: as Fraenkel points out, writing can produce particular effects when read, and these effects are “not reducible solely to the transmission of the written message, they occur because of the way in which the utterances are presented to the reader”: such phenomena are “act[s] of doing independent of the act of saying” and can be thought of as “writing acts”, in relation to Austin’s “speech acts” (Fraenkel, 2010: 36). The act of writing then produces “written objects”, which are particular artefacts that may be put to specific use – a writing act is then part of a network of social activities involving “the act of writing by hand, the speech act, the act of creating something,” and the act of placing it in the context where it can produce effects (ibid. 39). These insights will guide us as we examine the everyday texts of Uist – we will see how forms of writing which are considered the most ephemeral and insignificant in and of themselves might be creative both in that they are reproducers of social conventions and also potential sites for resistance.

A core tension in this account of the written word and its power is the distinction that is commonly made between the oral and the written, a distinction which has great significance in the Gaelic world, but which, I will also argue, has currency among those who practice nature conservation. In the “scriptural economy”, De Certeau points out the denigration of the oral – “the ‘oral’ is that which does not contribute to progress; reciprocally, the ‘scriptural’ is that which separates itself from the magical world of voices and tradition” (De Certeau, 1984: 134). Indeed, the voice of oral cultures “can no longer be
heard except within the interior of the scriptural systems where they recur” (ibid.: 131). Conversely, for Derrida, the logocentric epoch is also fundamentally phonocentric (that is, basing its ultimate truth claims upon the primacy of the voice): writing is “debased” in relation to the spoken word as it is a representation of a representation. That is, the spoken word is the most authentic expression of the psychic state, emerging in more direct conversation with the interiority of the mind, while writing is always merely representative in a technical way (1976). Thus the opposition of speech and writing is a function of logocentrism, of its assumption in a pre-existing truth that is separate from and described by practices of signification. However, Derrida argues, “there is no linguistic sign before writing”; the logocentric epoch operates on an understanding that writing as a human representation of a representation is proceeded by a different form of “natural, eternal, and universal writing” - originally conceived as the word of God and latterly as natural law (1976: 14-16). This natural law is, in Derrida’s archaeology of the history of Western metaphysics, “immediately united to the voice and to breath”: this leads to there being a “good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body” (ibid.: 17). Thus it might be said that there is a denigration at different times of both or either the written and the oral as being variously inauthentic and untrustworthy. Furthermore, the distinction between the oral and the written, as Derrida suggests, is on shaky ground. Many scholars have argued this, including the assertion that “there is little or no validity to the time-honoured dichotomy of ‘the literate tradition’ and ‘the oral tradition’” (Heath, 1982: 50-51).

In sum, then, we might think of the production of texts as “writing acts” in which authors act upon some phenomenon in the world, transforming it into a “written object” (Fraenkel, 2010). The creation of text makes use of generic conventions which lend them authority (Barber, 2009; Latour and Woolgar, 1987) and thus usefulness as written objects. Such objects may then be detached from their context and transmitted across time and space (Urban and Silverstein 1996). They may be put to use, in moments that we may, following Heath, characterise as “literacy events”: in these events we find that power is not just channelled through authorship and the writing act, but that reading may also be a means of creation and resistance (De Certeau, 1984). It is in the everyday literacy event then that we might find struggles over the creation of particular kinds of world. Following De Certeau, we
might classify scientific modernity as a formation which denigrates the oral and holds up the written as the ultimate in truth-making. However as we will see, there is, as Derrida would suggest, a distinct undercurrent within scientific circles that upholds the oral and regards the written with suspicion.

Following Das’s suggestion to look at the everyday as a site of politics, I turn not to literary writing but to quotidian forms of literacy. In what follows I take examples of engagement with the texts of everyday life to examine this tension between the written and the spoken. I do this in relation to both Gaelic and environmental management to examine how the islands might be spoken or written into existence. In her conclusion, Heath calls for further study to provide “the ways different social groups ‘take’ knowledge from the environment” through literacy events (Heath, 1982: 74). This is what I intend to do here. Following De Certeau, we might classify scientific modernity as a formation which denigrates the oral and holds up the written as the ultimate in truth-making. However as we will see, there is, as Derrida would suggest, a distinct undercurrent within scientific circles that upholds the oral. Thus while one might be tempted on the surface to imagine that the linguistic operations of the preservation of Gaelic to take place in the oral sphere, and those of the preservation of nature to take place primarily in the written, a more complex picture emerged in my conversations with interlocutors.

**Gaelic’s Literary Orality**

Gaelic has tended to be characterised as largely an oral language, and in this section I trace a little of the history of this characterisation, while presenting the ways in which it came to be constructed. In so doing, I show that the binary of oral-written is not as clear cut as is often imagined in relation to Gaelic. The point here is not to downplay the distinction between the written and the oral, or to suggest that the two are so intertwined as to make the distinction untenable. Rather, for contemporary Gaelic speakers the gap between written and spoken Gaelic is a crucial one in the politics of revitalisation, and the idea of Gaelic as a largely oral tradition is central to self-understandings. As such the aim is rather to historicise this gap as it has long been a central preoccupation within the Gaelic world.
In Michael Newton’s broad survey of Gaelic culture, *Warriors of the Word*, he argues that “the nature of Gaelic literature and literacy is widely misunderstood” (Newton, 2009: 81). Based on an understanding that a binary distinction between oral and literate societies is unhelpful and that orality and literacy are intertwined with each other on a spectrum, his account uses “‘text’ and ‘literature’ to refer generically to verbiage regardless of whether it is recorded from an oral performance or composed on the written page” (ibid.: 83). This is consistent with a certain school of thought outlined elsewhere in this chapter (e.g. Barber, 2009). In an “oral-dominant” society such as Gaeldom, Newton points out, “the verbal arts are not just aesthetically pleasing but functional”, and he points to the ways in which poetry “was relevant to every branch of knowledge and every aspect of the operation of society: practical, aesthetic, magical, legal, and ideological” (Newton, 2009: 83). Newton’s account takes a broad working definition of “text” and “literature” here to include oral material, but what of the physical, written word itself, and its relationship to the Gaelic tradition?

Historically verse has been the predominant form of Gaelic literature in print. This perhaps goes hand in hand with the orality of the Gaelic tradition and the importance afforded to song. It was traditionally “not intended to be read silently from the page but rather to be performed orally” and from the sixteenth century onward Gaelic verse was mostly composed with song in mind such that “the distinction between ‘song’ and ‘poetry’ had little significance” (McLeod and Newton, 2019: 12). In recent years, however, the short story has taken over as the primary form of Gaelic writing. The fact that the short story was favoured over the novel may, like the prior preponderance of poetry over other forms of literature, be related to the fact that “in its broadest sense the short story had had a long history in oral literature” (Cox, 2007: 284). Thus the oral forms of Gaelic traditions have, as might be expected, had a strong impact on what is set down in writing.

As scholars of media shift in the early modern period have pointed out, the distinction between oral and written culture is an arbitrary one, even showing that it is “impossible to separate either oral practices or ideas of the oral from print commerce”. In fact it is more likely that oral and written media were “copresent, interdependent media forms that genteel authors increasingly represented as separate for ideological reasons...to represent valuable oral traditions and practices as dying or dead” (McDowell, 2007: 6). The
proliferation of texts in Gaelic during this time comes alongside, and to some extent emerges from, a growing Enlightenment recognition that the non-literate societies “could also nourish a ‘poetical spirit’ that equalled and even excelled the literary resources of European nations in their modern, developed state” (Hudson 2002, 240). This realisation paves the way for the construction of the contemporary conception of the “oral tradition” as thinkers began to express concern about the potential damage done by the written word to the ways in which people engaged with language and society, in a mirror image to prior concerns in the immediate aftermath of the development of printing about the deficiency of oral culture and the need for the spreading of literacy. It is in this context then that James MacPherson “discovers” the apocryphal oral text of Ossian: an allegedly ancient epic Gaelic poem in the Homeric fashion which was fabricated by MacPherson in the 18th century, which nonetheless sparked an interest in Gaelic oral traditions and spurred its entextualisation.

From the middle of the 18th century there was a quick growth in the transcription and publication of Gaelic oral literature, following the success of and controversy surrounding James MacPherson’s Ossian, a “translation” of a Gaelic epic poem (in the Homeric sense) that never existed in the first place (MacLeod and Newton 2019, 177-179). This, as suggested above, comes alongside a construction of the oral tradition within progress narratives of the modern nation: here Gaelic is cast as precious traditional heritage which is soon to be lost at the hands of industrial society and must therefore be recorded and preserved. Gaelic literature then incorporated international influences throughout the 18th century, with poetry through the 19th century providing insights into Gaelic experiences with emigration, industrialisation, and new products such as tobacco. The large-scale migration and urbanisation of the 19th century helped to some extent to “weaken their [the Gaels’] attachment to orality and to push them to other means of cultural preservation”: in foreign and lowland ports, urban ceilidh houses were established which relied on the books of “readings” of oral material. Thus it became clear that text was “a particularly powerful agent in preserving the culture which they were in danger of losing in the alien environment of the cities” (Meek, 2007a: 108). There is significant evidence of 19th century Gaels transcribing and scrap-booking materials, including songs and other historical accounts from newspapers and other publications, bearing witness to a highly literate tradition: thus “interaction
between the manuscript and the printed book, and between both of these media and the world of orality, is clearly displayed throughout the nineteenth century” (Meek, 2007b: 170-171).

As the Gaelic scholar and historian Donald Meek explains, different versions of oral material emerged, with a tendency “to resolve issues in a manner favourable to the visible, printed word, and, as literacy spread within communities, oral tradition became its ‘poor relation’. In short, printed books were liable to create communities within communities, linked by literacy at different levels” (Ibid.: 160-161). Committing the oral tradition to text has not necessarily served the interests of all parties: while collectors and publishers were certain of the educational benefits of Gaelic publishing, “less easily convinced were the tradition-bearers themselves, who were sometimes unable to reconcile the static nature of the printed tale with the live oral performance” (Ibid.: 155). The rise in print publishing also led to greater editorial manipulation of texts according to what versions might be more or less publishable or which might conform more or less to literary conventions, with impacts on the social context in which the Gaelic tradition circulated. The anthropologist Malcolm Chapman argues that Gaelic culture’s introduction to the European imagination via the “inauthentic” text of Ossian has led to a situation in which “Gaelic culture has been subject to a literary interpretation that has diminished and subsumed it”, even that “Gaelic culture has to a considerable extent become, particularly in its more self-conscious moments, the literary interpretation to which it was initially subjected by an alien tradition” (Chapman, 1978: 28).

This spectre of editorial manipulation of the oral is ever-present in Gaelic scholarship. Writing on the value of the new digital availability of audio recordings of voice in folklore archives, MacAulay tells us: “Preservation of the original sound recordings is an invaluable historical record; the archive becomes evidence, inviolate to literary tinkering. Of course, debates as to original sources of the actual material remain—whether, for example, a particular heroic ballad may have been transmitted solely through the oral tradition or has, at some point, re-entered it via textual intervention” (Macaulay, 2012: 174). The recording of voice is considered to be “invaluable” because of its status as being “inviolable,” unlike the written record. However, even that is haunted by the possibility that the content such
seemingly authentic recordings might have been violated by “literary tinkering” at some point along the way. Indeed, a quantitative study of lexical similarities in corpuses of folk tales from Uist has found that, while “the oral-literate debate has plagued Gaelic scholarship for many years in the past with no real resolution,” it is possible that “a type of literate aesthetic could have come down in oral tradition” bundled up in stories which passed in and out of written and oral forms – that is oral tradition was edited for publication and then found its way back out of the text into orality in a modified form (Lamb, 2012: 154-155).

In the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, the “frequency and intensity of Gaelic language use have diminished very considerably” at the same time as “the societal and political standing of the language has improved significantly” alongside the “publication of books increasingly considerably, new genres developing, and new subjects and perspectives coming to the fore” (MacLeod and Newton, 2019: 546). There is thus something of a paradox in that the incorporation of the Gaelic language within the written state comes at a time when its orality diminishes. This is not lost on the authors of the Gaelic Crisis who point out that “Gaelic policy bodies and groups have developed an inflated sense of discursive importance which has at times camouflaged or deflected from the process of vernacular decline. In one sense, Gaelic now ‘lives’ as much or even more so in discourse than it actually exists in society.” (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020: 417). For some scholars, then, the increasing appearance of Gaelic as a written language is part and parcel of its diminution as a spoken language.

As we have seen, this question of Gaelic as a written or spoken language has been a tension throughout time, and the written word has long been treated with a sort of suspicion. In some cases it enabled the dissemination and preservation of Gaelic oral literature, but it did this within a framework that cast Gaelic as endangered, and potentially jettisoned the authenticity of the original material along the way. The development of literary Gaelic as transcription of oral culture might be said to have shaped the language according to particular interests. It does so in a way that emphasises orality as primary in Gaelic culture, and in so doing helps to construct a certain form of language ideology: that which foregrounds endangerment and the need to preserve the language. An oral phenomenon is easy to construct as being one in threat of disappearance, existing as it does only in the
voices of a vulnerable community. This sense of vulnerability and imminent disappearance has long been present within discourses surrounding Gaelic, and the insistence on orality is a key component of these discourses. An oral tradition falls into the category of UNESCO’s framework of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and thus provides a framework for preservation that is more easily leveraged than for a culture that has a high level of tangibility such as a largely text-based culture might have. Indeed I often heard the phrase ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ invoked by those engaged in Gaelic-related work.

This account has tended to foreground the literary in the textual history of the Gaelic language. However, beyond the “texts” – in the sense of a “tissue of words” aimed at enabling culture to transcend time – there are other forms in which Gaelic literacy is available, namely, forms themselves. Unlike the literary text, however, their generic conventions efface this aspect of themselves as preserving culture: they scrub subjectivity from the written record and present themselves as simple representations of fact. In the next section we will hear from my interlocutors on their interactions with more quotidian writings (forms, social media, road signs), and examine some of these texts themselves to think about how Gaelic appears in writing in everyday life. If the language ideology of endangerment and vulnerability is inherent in much Gaelic publishing, then the everyday literacies of the language seem to reflect those concerns in practice: Gaelic becomes dislocated from its oral forms and alienated from the voices of speakers. The Gaelic of the state is part of a policy of preservation by inclusion – incorporating the language into the state’s quotidian written forms to prevent language shift by enabling everyday writing acts to take place without English. In either case, then, both literary and everyday written Gaelic reflect in different ways a language ideology infused with loss. In what follows I put discussions of Gaelic texts into conversation with some of the islands’ most prolific quotidian text-makers: those involved in biological recording and wildlife management. In this I hope to reveal that some of the foundational tensions about the text as a preserver of reality are not unique to the Gaelic world, but reflect something broader within island society.
Writing and Loss, Writing to Preserve

It would not be fair to say that the Gaelic literary world is divorced from the vernacular Gaelic speaking world as a whole: in fact the first entirely Gaelic speaking event I attended during my fieldwork was the launch of a book, a reprint of Dòmhnall Iain MacDhòmhnaill’s *Uibhist a Deas*, a historical work on the island of South Uist. However to repeat Meek’s insight that I cited earlier, publishing has indeed created “communities within communities” as such events drew a particular crowd engaged in the institutional aspects of Gaelic revitalisation, i.e. those represented in media, arts, and education. There is a large population in Uist who are fluent, everyday, native speakers but who cannot read the language. As one retiree, a fluent speaking crofter told me:

“When we went to secondary school there were people who were experts at Gaelic, and I got a smack in the mouth for spelling a word with a Y, because it sounded like it, and I was so thick I didn’t know there was no Y in the Gaelic alphabet.”

To this day, he is not a strong reader or writer in Gaelic, which is a common state for many fluent speakers: while Gaelic has long been available at school, the ways in which it is taught leave many without a functional level of literacy in the language. This tendency towards Gaelic illiteracy comes alongside a lack of faith in the literate institutions to save the language. As one South Uist crofter put it in a discussion of the *Gaelic Crisis*:

The debate since this book came out has always been fairly dominated by agencies or people working in agencies or for projects or whatever, the thing is, as long as there’s money, public investment in education, broadcasting, the arts, and so forth, the Gaelic language will be alive in those spheres, but it may come to a point that it is only alive in those spheres, that it becomes a language like Latin. What this book is talking about – and a lot of people seem to have missed this – is that this is about people speaking Gaelic in their own homes or at sheep fanks, or auction marts, or in shops or on fishing boats or whatever that might be. I don’t know what the answer is to see that happen – maybe no one does – but that’s what we should focus on, and a lot of people have mistakenly taken this personally as a slight on the education
system which is doing a pretty good job actually or the arts sector but it’s not at all. This is all very personal and very real about the way people live their lives, it’s about the language that they think in their own heads and that’s something hard to intervene around.

Here we see written Gaelic compared to Latin, a language that exists solely within a written tradition. Education is seen as a part of the solution by this interlocutor, but he has little faith in an approach based on the written word to solve a problem which is in fact about everyday oral usage – as he points out, it is difficult to intervene in the “language that they think in their own heads”. For many this has little to do with Gaelic media. A North Uist crofter, Seumas, told me:

Yeah, definitely I don’t write in Gaelic, and I don’t often listen to programmes or anything in Gaelic or that much Gaelic music, so my main exposure would just be in conversation and I like that. I like being able to go between the two, and in a very long-winded way it definitely does have connotations of home and the croft and that’s linked with placenames. But with the generations and tradition and things and some of the words you would use, I think that’s my responsibility to pass on to whoever, and they will disappear because they’re not logged or archived, unless I start drawing a map.

The orality of Gaelic then for many today has little to do with written forms or texts broadly conceived to include radio programmes or music, at least on the surface (as discussed it may be that much of the oral tradition may have been transmitted partially through texts). Rather many speakers engage with Gaelic only in informal, unrecorded settings: “in their own homes or at sheep fanks, or auction marts, or in shops or on fishing boats or whatever that might be”. There is however a recognition that without textual mediation, through logging, archiving, or “drawing a map”, aspects of that oral culture might disappear.

As with the Gaelic world, there is a sense that the natural world must be preserved in text at the risk that it be lost altogether in the face of environmental change. Biological recorders invariably spoke of the need to create as detailed a record as possible in the face of
environmental change in order to manage and understand the biodiversity loss in its wake. This information could also be used as a resource for rewilding. It is considered vitally important to record this information in writing, and there is a scepticism of the power of oral tradition to provide useful data: as one birder said to me, “If you talk to the crofters, they’ll say ‘oh there was hundreds of corn bunting in the past,’ but how many exactly?” Without a written record of precise quantification, “hundreds” as an abstract expression of the general quality of abundance is not useable data.

The issue of oral and anecdotal evidence rears its head frequently in debates around wildlife management in Uist. Explaining a conversation he had had with a colleague about deer population management, a perennial source of heated disagreement in the islands, one community council member explained to me:

I'm not a crofter and I enjoy having deer around, but I do understand that the population needs to be controlled. So I explained my views to her, said that I thought the population had decreased quite noticeably in the last 4 or 5 years I've lived here, and I wouldn't mind seeing it increase a bit. And she didn't agree - we don't live far away from each other. She thinks there are still lots of deer where she lives, whereas I'm convinced the population is much lower, I'm not sure if that's because of culling, it might be.

I was surprised by this, and said to him that he was the first person who had ever told me that the deer population had gone down. He continued:

I really do think they've gone down, and I think sometimes people are in a default mode where they feel a bit oppressed by environmental concerns and they think they have to say, always, "oh the deer situation is terrible" to try and get the maximum level of control possible. I'm not sure whether it's always correct. It's all based on anecdotal experience, but you could go out and turn it quantitative, measure things, the number of times record the date every time you see them, go out regularly. It is all anecdotal, but it wouldn't be impossible to gather the data.
In this conversation it is possible to draw out the sense that there is a common discourse around deer populations, that people feel the need to say certain things, and that what people say (incorrectly) could easily be corrected by an exercise of monitoring and text production – to quantify the deer in spreadsheets rather than to qualify their impact in oral conventions, saying “oh the deer situation is terrible”. This is similar to discourses around the need to preserve Gaelic culture in maps and archives - recording the numbers of birds or deer is vital for informing conservation practice just as archiving Gaelic oral culture creates a resource for revitalisation - but seems to adopt a different approach to the oral and personal as sources of knowledge: that is, if it is not written down in standardised form, then it is not valid.

One major problem facing the assiduous documentation of environmental change in Uist is the age of the recorders themselves. As explained to me by one of them, the core group who manage the local biological databases and the most dedicated recorders have an average age of “closer to 65 than 55” and there are no young people “with the time or inclination to step up and take over”. As such there is a worry that the considerable work of the past ten years might be lost. There were efforts to partner with the University of the Highlands and Islands, but the Scottish Government told them to stop developing this project because they were investigating the possibility of a centralised Scottish biological recording system. One of the committee members said to me: “When the people who hold the purse strings speak, you listen, but it’s been held up for years while they messed around and did all sorts of workshops and focus groups, did a big expensive report, said it was going to cost tens of millions of pounds, and they’re still messing around with it.” Meanwhile, time is running out:

“There’s nobody there, and it would be a shame if the whole thing just disappeared. There’s the whole accumulated experience which will die with us. There’s no one to pass it on to, that information is in their head: someone sends in a record, and it’ll jump out as unusual, so we’ll say immediately, “oh that’s rare”. Someone else would have to comb through the database and check them but I can look at the sheet now and just call it. That’s what we need to pass on to people who would take it on. Otherwise, it will all be lost.”
This sounds remarkably like the ways in which people talk about Gaelic culture: first, that there is an ageing population that are custodians of considerable knowledge. Second, that this endangered knowledge is effectively oral culture, it is “in their head”. It is not codified in text, like the databases of biological recording, but is something else that must be “passed on” to a next generation. One naturalist also bemoaned the fact that professional ecologists often fail to take advantage of this local knowledge:

Sometimes the real skills are in the amateurs, not the professionals, so nowadays you've got a lot of people doing ecological surveys for developers and things like this and they're often young people who've come out of degrees and sometimes they sort of ignore the information they could have got from local naturalists who have been working in these areas for so much longer and sometimes you read the reports and go 'that's just not true, that's not right. You've not recorded the fact that this is here - everybody knows that this is here.' so the professional ecologists aren't always the best informed about a particular area.

Here we can see what “everybody knows” emerging as an important piece of ecological data: much like discourses around Gaelic folklore and local knowledge which are increasingly taken seriously as sources of valid environmental knowledge, there is a partly articulated sense here of there being a similar form of oral knowledge passing among amateur biological recorders. This form of knowledge is, like the traditional environmental knowledge of the Gaelic speaking population, largely ignored by professionals and is in danger of disappearance. In this way, we can see that even among the most writing-oriented actors, people who describe themselves as biological recorders and set huge store by the written word, are also custodians of a form of oral lore which is valuable for knowing the world, and seemingly cannot be written down, thus forming an Intangible Cultural Heritage similar to the oral culture of the Gaelic tradition. The texts that they do produce can be made to tell qualitative stories of the movements and activities of recorders, stories which their texts attempt to suppress via the generic conventions of the database. Thus it can be seen that both in relation to Gaelic and the natural environment, there is an understanding among interested parties that the transformation of the world into textual
form is valuable for its preservation. Within a culture that sees its value and authenticity primarily in terms of its orality, written documentation protects against its disappearance in the face of weakening oral communities. In a culture that prizes the written text as the most authentic representation of reality, meanwhile, there is also a recognition of oral transmission of intangible knowledge and experience.

**Daily Writing Practices**

But how does this play out in the everyday writing practices and literacy events of island life? How does this interplay of the value of text and speech come to manifest differently among those who speak Gaelic and those who monitor nature? In this section, I look to form-filling as a standardised way of producing a ‘data-fied’ version of the islands, a daily literacy event that constructs a version of the quotidian in a fixed genre.

I start with the forms of biological recording. In 2017, Outer Hebrides Birds, which collates the records of all avian species in the islands, collected 35,000 records from a number of individuals, 10,000 of which came from a single individual. These 10,000 records emerge from a practice of everyday record-keeping, in which many of my interlocutors engaged, though obviously not all in quite so prolific a fashion. On daily walks in the surroundings of their homes, naturalists (particularly birders) keep meticulous records of the wildlife they observe, or do regular checks of their gardens, in some cases even (humanely) trapping birds in elaborate apparatuses in their gardens in order to carry out more detailed recording of biometric data. They fill in forms or spreadsheets in a standardised way and submit them to the County Bird Recorder, who then produces reports based on this data. In this way, form-filling as a daily literacy practice produces generically consistent written objects which, through their consistency, are put to use in aggregate to tell stories about the state of particular populations of birds. This only becomes truly useful data if it is done on a regular basis so that the stability of populations can be assessed and reliable quantifications can be made, and thus it is necessary as a daily practice.
However it is not just the health of populations that must be recorded. The need to regularly quantify environmental problems was also expressed to me in terms of marine pollution. A South Uist naturalist said to me:

The trend over the years is we don't get oil on the beach anymore and we get a lot more junk, plastic. The beaches were a lot cleaner. I think probably because there was just a lot less plastic in use then. I don’t know what it is. But you never got heaps of stuff like that, in the past. I think it was always a problem, you occasionally came across birds stuck in netting, especially gannets seem to dive into the stuff, you’d find them strangled, so it was always there as an issue, but it’s just the amount. The amount has changed quite dramatically over the last two or three years, it's really grown. It's one of those things, I wasn’t recording that. I was recording oil. I wish I’d been making assessments of how much junk. I don't think it was there because I would have recorded it if there were excessive amounts.

In the days when marine oil pollution was a greater problem, he recorded each instance of it in order to provide an accurate means to monitor the problem. Plastic pollution, on the other hand, has only relatively recently become a problem and there is a sense of regret at having missed the chance to quantify it along the way. The daily rounds become a site where small changes can be noticed in the environment, “assessed” and quantified in order to provide an accurate written record of those changes. In this context, then, my interlocutor regrets not making detailed notes of plastic pollution as it began to increase, so that the numbers could be used to better understand the problem: an anecdotal or general sense is not enough without documentation. In that sense, then, daily standardised writing practices are vital for understanding environmental change such that there will be data available to inform policy and other forms of action.

But what forms of standardised daily writing impacts upon the Gaelic speaking community? For those who engage in crofting, at least, paperwork is an increasing part of working the croft. To illustrate this, an anecdote: I’m sitting with two generations of a crofting family in North Uist. It’s a wild and wet day at the beginning of winter, so I’m in luck: on fair days it can be tricky to pin down a crofter for a chat, and we’re sitting in their conservatory drinking
cups of tea and watching a storm make its way in from the Atlantic. I ask them what they think is the biggest difference between the croft when the father (we’ll call him Seòras) was running the croft and today, now that his son (Aonghus) has taken over.

Aonghus: The biggest difference between my generation and every generation that came before is the amount of paperwork I have to deal with: every day, forms about everything under the sun about crofting. It's the most annoying thing. We have inspections about everything all the time. The government inspecting the sheep and cattle and land checks, trying to take bits off you here and there - they go around measuring the fields here and there and take a few bits off you to save a few pennies. And I find that's the biggest drain, sucks the enjoyment out the job.

Seòras: Yeah yeah, the township clerk did all the paperwork for the township. It wasn't very much, just had to fill a form in for the cattle subsidies - he'd ask all the crofters how many they had and put in the claim, and he got all the money and he went around to everyone, and there was no form filling for any of the crofters.

Aonghus: I'm sure it's the same in every industry, when you're self employed and you're working, you're out all daylight hours normally every day of the week and then you come home and have to deal with that and you can't be bothered. Yes, and pointless things really, things like you have to fill in the forms and they're asking you for information you've already given them a million times, and different parts of different departments asking for the same information, there's hardly a day goes by when there isn't a form coming in for something else.

There has been a major increase in the demand for crofters to document their daily activities in multiple forms, and this is a demoralising experience for many. At least according to Aonghus and Seòras, paperwork used to be minimal and often done at the township level, whereas now it is overwhelming and individualised. Meanwhile inspections on land check the precise measurement of fields against the textual versions of those fields which are required to calculate the amount of money provided for agricultural subsidies, which in many cases are provided at a flat rate per hectare of land managed in a particular way, usually for environmental benefit. These schemes and subsidies come at a high administrative time cost above and beyond the statutory reporting requirements for
crofters, and for many are essential cash injections without which crofting would not otherwise be viable. Because of this, many crofters outsource the application process and pay significant fees for this service, as well as the considerable costs involved in fencing off areas for compliance in schemes and application fees themselves. As one crofter in South Uist observed, “everyone’s making money out of crofters”. This also comes with a level of inequality of access: one development worker put it this way:

some people are against subsidies but the right kind are needed, targeting people who actually need it, and unfortunately when it comes to grants, it tends to be a certain kind of person who can access them because they know how to fill in the forms: people from an educated backgrounds coming to grants know how to access and how to fill in forms.

As a result, subsidies are either more likely to benefit those who are better able to navigate and access the textual systems required, or who can pay others to manage that process for them. This question of access takes on another dimension when considering it from the point of view of Gaelic. Firstly, the pressures on crofters to maintain a viable livelihood in Gaelic-speaking areas have a large impact on rural depopulation and consequent language shift. But secondly, there have been efforts to increase the availability of such forms in Gaelic – have these been effective to curb language shift? Seumas again:

I see a lot of these forms in Gaelic and most big government bodies have them, whether it's crofting forms or whatever else and I rarely get the Gaelic version because unless you're in the academic Gaelic field, you're not generally using such descriptive words, because 98% of what you do would be in English, you're used to seeing the forms in English.

In this way we can see that paperwork in Gaelic does not in reality increase the accessibility, but rather in the bilingual world navigated by all Gaelic-speakers, the technical vocabulary required for engagement with the state in its various written forms is more familiar in English than it is in Gaelic, “unless you’re in the academic Gaelic field”. In other words, where the daily literacy practices of engagement with the state are available through Gaelic,
the opportunity is generally not taken. While the biological recorders have access to a culturally acceptable writing practice to help preserve the natural world in a standardised form, then, this is not mirrored by Gaelic, which lack the same level of daily reinforcement in text. Why would this be? It does, of course, have largely to do with the general lack of confidence held by most Gaelic speakers in their reading and writing skills. It also relates, as will be shown in the next section, to the ways in which standardised written forms have historically been, and continue to be, at some remove from the experienced reality of Gaelic life.

**Representing Reality Accurately**

Gaelic has in fact always had an uneasy relationship with official written records of the state. The terms required to describe people and places do not always map neatly onto one another across language boundaries. The Western Isles themselves have many names, both in English and Gaelic, each of which resonate with particular aspects of the islands and how they are imagined (see Introduction). As discussed, even in English speaking administrative contexts, the Gaelic name of the county – Na h-Eileanan an Iar – is the official one, and as such the one that usually presents itself in drop-down menus on digital forms. There is a further name that I did not mention previously, in which the islands are named as a singular island – this time incorrectly. This is done very frequently in online forms when the most commonly used Gaelic name for the archipelago appears in monolingual English-speaking environments: Eilean Siar. This means simply “Western Isle” or “a Western Isle” and emerges from an Anglophone misunderstanding of Gaelic grammar. The official name of the islands, in all contexts including anglophone ones, is Na h-Eileanan Siar, meaning literally the Western Isles (closely related and commonly used is Na h-Eileanan an Iar – literally “the islands in the west”). Previously the parliamentary constituency was known in English as The Western Isles but this changed in 2005, and the local council of the islands is officially named Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Council of the Western Isles). This is where the grammatical confusion emerges. The nominative case of the county’s name is Na h-Eileanan Siar, while the genitive, appearing in the phrase “council of the Western Isles” is Eilean Siar. In Gaelic, a common form of the genitive plural appears identical to the nominative singular form, although they can be distinguished from each other through the definite article in use:
nan for the genitive plural, and an for the nominative singular. Therefore while “Eilean Siar” is the correct form in the context of the council’s full title as a genitive, it is incorrect on its own as a nominative. However, the form “Eilean Siar” appears commonly in various contexts where non-Gaelic speakers have not understood this. This is experienced most frequently in daily life when filling in one’s address in an online form where a drop-down list provides a set number of options for County of Residence, meaning that in order to provide information about their address, islanders are required to provide a grammatically incorrect form of their county’s name. This appears frequently in news outlets and even the websites of national institutions such as the Met Office which provides a forecast for an area it refers to as “Highlands & Eilean Siar” (as of 4 October 2022).

This finer point of Gaelic grammar may appear pedantic, although I would argue it is an excellent quotidian example faced by inhabitants of na h-Eileanan an Iar of the ways in which the texts of everyday literacy practices can underline social and political marginalisation. It is moreover a reminder of the limits of official recognition of minority languages on an institutional level. The transition to official use of the Gaelic name of the council represents such a recognition. However, commercial bodies and news outlets consistently misuse the name and present it in its incorrect form, societally undermining the symbolic political gesture of the official renaming. These examples then highlight a further aspect of the power of the quotidian texts of everyday life as worldbuilding: the temptation might be to think that the official assignation of a particular name inscribes a particular reality. In this case, the renaming of na h-Eileanan an Iar produces a version of the United Kingdom in which Gaelic is equally valued as English within the political sphere, reducing its marginal status in the nation state. However the insistence on the incorrect form of the name in the United Kingdom at large demonstrates the ability of vernacular naming to resist this move and remind Gaelic-speakers on a daily basis of the continuing marginalisation of their language.

The everyday misnaming of the Gaelic world exists similarly in relation to the individual person. On a personal level, the translation of names across cultural boundaries with the Anglophone world has a difficult history, as English-speaking bureaucracies required English names (Mewett, 1982). The sloinneadh, or patronymic, is a core part of many people’s
identity, as it encodes within it information about the person’s lineage and heritage, their rootedness within the Gaelic world: e.g. Seumas Calum Dhomhnaill, would translate to James, son of Calum, son of Donald. Related to this is the practice of name translation – that is, having a name in Gaelic and a name in English. This practice has important historical, political, cultural resonance, as well as impacts on the everyday as it situates the individual within a given lineage in a community. Historically, the anglophone state did not recognise Gaelic names or the longer sloinneadh for official purposes, requiring translation and a restriction of the lineage to one prior generation – so Iain Mac Dhòmhnaill becomes John MacDonald, flattening out the detail in crossing linguistic boundaries.

In addition to bilingual translated naming, there is also a high prevalence of unofficial or nick-names. Bramwell’s study on anthroponymy in the Western Isles has documented the ways in which “explaining someone” in the islands often entails a tension between their “official names” (usually in English) and the “unofficial Gaelic naming tradition” which “situates[s] a person within the community” (Bramwell, 2016: 47) and represents a form of resistance to the linguistic fixedness of the English-speaking world. In a situation of high “isonymy”, where a large proportion of the population are named with combinations of a small pool of personal and surnames, the use of local, unofficial names is widespread. Similarly, the sloinneadh might help to distinguish individuals with similar names from one another. As an incomer to the islands, this can cause confusion as in many cases people will not know a person’s “official” name, only their family or personal name.

There is thus a tension between the use of one’s English and Gaelic or local name, which relates to the recognition of Gaelic names as being valid or not as personal identifiers. I frequently found myself in confusing conversations where I was accustomed to referring to someone using one of their three names and realised too late that the stranger I was being told about was actually someone I already knew. For example, a man I knew as Iain Ruairidh was referred to as J.R. in a discussion of local people who might be good to speak to for my research. This was a nickname derived from the anglicisation of his Gaelic name to John Rory/Roddy, and it took a description of the man for me to realise this was someone to whom I had already spoken. The name by which you know someone in the islands may have much to do with the context in which you meet them: for me, a researcher known to be
“interested in the Gaelic”, J.R. was Iain Ruairidh, but for English-speaking incomers, he was J.R.\textsuperscript{13} Despite the fact that the state does now recognise Gaelic names, there is a continuing culture of name translation, and many people still have official English names that represent their identity in official writing, and then their Gaelic names or their local nickname which only ever appears in oral discourse. Thus the person you encounter in paperwork may go by a different name from the person you bump into in the Coop. Even with the increasing acceptance of Gaelic names in official settings, the nickname cannot appear in the form. As such for the Gaelic world to appear in the standardised written objects of the state requires a level of simplification and distortion meaning that the social world of oral discourse is very different from the social world in text. A person is likely to disappear in being circumscribed by paperwork which, even if in Gaelic, is structured according to an Anglophone idiom. In both the naming of people and places, then, everyday literacy events such as form-filling are ones in which the Gaelic subject or place becomes distorted by the generic conventions of the particular written object, whether the form is filled in Gaelic or in English.

If the Gaelic person or place disappears in text, it could be said that the opposite occurs in the case of biological recording, where the generic conventions of the writing practice actively aim at effacing the individuality of the writer in order to safeguard the apparent objectivity of the data. Several people engaged in recording told me that if you look at the biological records, what you are really seeing, more than an accurate record of the islands’ biodiversity, is an accurate record of the islands’ biological recorders: “If you look at files for certain species, there’s only records in certain parts of South Uist because that’s where people are concentrated. Why are there so many moths in South Uist? Because that’s where Robert Scott\textsuperscript{14} lives. If I look at distributions of moths I know where the moth trappers live. Data tells about people.” The data allows us to build a contemporary and a historical picture, as one naturalist tells me:

\begin{quote}
If you look back, there weren’t very often experienced naturalists living out here for the whole year, so you get huge numbers of records from May through to the end of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Incidentally, this Anglophone nickname likely derives comically from a character in the television show Dallas, which ran from 1978-1991.
\textsuperscript{14} Pseudonymised.
August, when they've come up for their week's holiday or whatever it is, and then nobody's recording stuff that's here in November, October, March, so there are gaps of things - unless they come out in the summer they probably weren't recorded. And you can also tell where naturalists went on holiday that year. So there'll be a batch of lichen records around Stornoway Castle from a particular year because that's where a lichenologist spent his summer holidays. I think there's probably more decent naturalists living here all year round than there would have been 30, 40 years ago – that might be doing a disservice to people but maybe it's that there wasn't a system of recording which is as efficient as it is now. But it's not evenly spread. I think there's probably more good recorders on the Uists than there are on Lewis and Harris. So it does tell you an awful lot about human behaviour. They are of course all valuable records but it does create a false picture of what's here. There are more holes than there are records. I think it's about recognising that it's not likely to be a real gap, but a gap in recording efforts. So when you see a gap in the records about something, my first thought is, is it really not there? If it's not recorded here it doesn't mean it's not here. It just means it's not recorded here, or it's not here.

There are two possibilities.

In this account, we can use biodiversity data to tell stories about the flow of human naturalists through the UK. In the early days of recording, we can surmise by looking at the available data that there were no lichenologists living in the islands full time, because recording was primarily a summertime activity. Clusters of records near tourist attractions indicate the relationship between biological recording and tourism, specifically. Data now tells us that there are more naturalists living in the islands, because of the increase in records from the colder months. What it can tell us is that a particular species is or was present at a particular moment in time, but not that it is not present, or with any degree of accuracy what population sizes might be. This data can then be used to produce species presence checklists which help with establishing biodiversity baselines. However, what it can tell us with certainty, is “an awful lot about human behaviour”.

If there is a certain scepticism about the records to show definitive gaps in biological recording of moths and lichens, there is less agreement in the sphere of bird recording. The
County Bird Recorder receives vastly more records than Outer Hebrides Biological Recording: she used the example of 2017, in which 35,000 records were submitted, versus the just under 6,000 records available on the Outer Hebrides Biological Recording NBN data for the same year. This is reflective of the relative popularity of bird recording compared to other taxa, and the general prominence of birds within natural history and environmental discourse in general in the United Kingdom. It does also, argues the Bird Recorder, give us a clearer picture of what is present, in what numbers, and where, than for the taxa generally covered by OHBR. Of course, the bird records could also be used to tell the stories of particular individuals, and in some cases could likely be used to build a detailed annual account – as mentioned previously, of those 35,000 records submitted to Outer Hebrides Birds in 2017, 10,000 of those were from one individual.

In the daily writing practices of the recorders, then, there is some disagreement about what levels of reality are represented in their texts. For some, the intended object (e.g. populations of lichens or moths or fungi) appears only in a hazy form, while for those in the know the texts throw the conditions of their own production sharply into relief and represent instead the activities of humans. This may be less true for birds, although certainly there are human stories to be told from that data in a similar way, despite the intended disappearing act of the author in the database (as illustrated in my opening vignette). This disappearing act of the subject within paperwork is likewise visible in Gaelic speakers’ engagements with forms, and, along with a literacy barrier, helps perhaps to explain why people do not see the usefulness of Gaelic paperwork for engaging with the state. Though translated into Gaelic, the form still requires the Gaelic subject to distort itself to fit into the box, and as such it represents an alien pattern of Gaelic usage, a reshaping into an English mode of thinking and writing about the self. The contexts thus mirror each other in an intriguing way: in filling out a form in Gaelic about activities on the croft, a crofter attempts to represent themselves but might find aspects of their social self-erased by the conditions of the form. Meanwhile, a biological recorder writes their record in a way that aims to efface the social self, but finds aspects of themselves unwittingly revealed when their data is viewed in aggregate by someone who knows where to look. In both cases there are distortions. In the field of recording, the distortion is more in relation to the meta-representations of the texts themselves: that is, they self-represent as being straightforward
representations of what lives where, but in fact this obfuscates what the texts really tell us about who lives and works where. Meanwhile the everyday literacy events of life in the islands require mis-spellings and distorting mistranslations of places and people which alienate the written objects from the phenomena they describe, again while purporting to represent these things transparently and objectively.

**Contesting Reality**

Thus far I have discussed the daily writing practices of islanders primarily as they relate to the accurate representation of what exists: do written worlds correspond to experienced phenomena, do texts represent (only) what they intend or claim to represent, and why would one bother producing an accurate written representation of the world? Representations of all kinds might be said to influence reality in a feedback loop, but there are also situations in which the writing of texts are explicitly deployed to do so, or to contest such constructions. The bureaucratic work of wildlife management has many such means of making the world through representation. For example, if I have spoken already about the perceived unreliability of the oral in these contexts, there are however means to fix speech in management contexts – meeting minutes. The following anecdote was related to me in relation to meetings of the Deer Management Group:

Cull targets are part of the Deer Management Group. I said it in front of the meeting to the then-factor that I think the issue is sort of easy: if you can bring that herd down to its original – not original but viable – status, that will go a long way in the community. He said, “Yes I think I can agree to doing that.”

I was the secretary. I wrote that down in the minutes. He agreed to cut that down to 500 and of course, knowing the background, I was ready for the next meeting and sure enough: when we were confirming that the minutes were an accurate record, “Objection! Paragraph whatever: that's not what I said.”

And I said, “Robert you were sitting next to Iain on that day - is that what Iain said?” “Yes, that's what he said.”

“Well it's not what I meant to say.”
And I know he went back to the estate with a flea in his ear and was told absolutely
not. So then we had to remind him, “Iain, minutes are a record of what people said,
not what they meant to say.”

In this account there is the intercession of a genre of procedural writing – the meeting
minute – to fix the unreliability of oral discourse. Meeting minutes bear witness to decisions
and commitments made in speech and solidify them in writing in order to make them
binding. The untrustworthiness of the oral, seen as inherently unstable, is thereby
transformed into fixity through a genre of writing. When the minutes are evoked, the world
is held to account to proceed in the manner set out therein. If oral discourse can involve
denial of prior promises having been made, the written word protects against this. The
meeting minutes, then, as a text of the everyday workings of organisations, can be used to
transform unstable verbal utterances into actionable facts and thus to make the world in
their image.

Other kinds of daily writing provide more open spaces for the contestation of such
worldmaking, as opposed to genres such as the meeting minute which aim at shutting down
contestation. In what follows I discuss a controversy that erupted in a particular corner of
Twitter surrounding a common form of everyday written Gaelic that might be used to
discuss the place of Gaelic within Scotland: the road sign. Road signs have been described by
Fraenkel as “everyday speech acts whose performativity is real although not spectacular”
(2010, 38). This is meant in the sense that road signs create spaces within which certain
actions are made possible or impossible, directly affecting behaviour such as parking in
particular spaces etc. In the context of bilingual naming on road signs, which is common
practice in the Highlands and Islands, the road sign takes on a further performative force: it
designates and creates a space in which Gaelic is relevant and necessary for navigation,
inscribing the area as a Gaelic-speaking area. Taking into account the power of this text, it is
perhaps not surprising that the use of Gaelic names and words in the public sphere is an
endless source of controversy, commonly manifesting in objections to the word
“ambaileans” appearing on the side of ambulances throughout Scotland, and occasional
complaints about bilingual roadsigns in the Gàidhealtachd.
In 2020, Gaelic social media exploded with a series of memes ridiculing the anti-bilingualism of Effie Deans, a blogger who claimed she got lost trying to find Fort William because of confusing bilingual signs where the English name appeared alongside its Gaelic name: An Gearasdan (literally The Garrison, reflecting the historic presence of the British military in the region). This earned considerable ridicule not least because, as anyone familiar with the area would know, there are very few roads in and out of An Gearasdan and it is very difficult to get lost finding it. The result was a proliferation of memes lampooning the idea that An Gearasdan is difficult for non-Gaelic speakers to locate (see below examples).

![An Gearasdan memes, sourced from X (then Twitter)](image)

Fig. 5: An Gearasdan memes, sourced from X (then Twitter)

However while the primary reaction from the Gaelic-speaking world was expressed through parody, there is also a significant awareness in the discussion generated by this ill-fated blogger of the political context of her statements. Bella Caledonia, an online magazine with a strong focus on social justice in Scotland, tweeted:

The sublime irony of Effie Deans careering around the highlands confused by all the garrisons has warmed my heart this Friday. She’s like a post-imperial psychotic sat nav gone wrong. I do like her call for signs in one language or the other though. Gaelic it is?
Softened somewhat by the jovial mocking tone of this tweet is the word “post-imperial”: a barbed joke that reminds the reader of the connection between English monolingualism and forms of imperial coercive oppression in the construction of the United Kingdom as state. As one user put it in response to Bella Caledonia:

Effie Dean’s disingenuous tweet, unfortunately for her, highlights the need to protect and preserve Gaelic as a living language in the face of a wilful, politicised ignorance that would rather destroy a vulnerable heritage to score cheap political points!

This was characteristic of the discourse following the complaint: a mixture of humour mocking monoglot ignorance, but also an awareness that that ignorance is not without political power. The use of Gaelic placenames, or lack of their use, is closely tied to an understanding of the threats facing “a vulnerable heritage”. In the space of social media, then, ephemeral texts are a space in which broader debates about the place of Gaelic in Scotland play out. The tweets themselves, and discourse in general on X (or Twitter as it was at the time of the debate), move at a high speed and become irrelevant quickly as the zeitgeist moves on and users with it. Memes such as these are produced, making jokes which make little to no sense outside of the context of the moment in a small niche of the internet. Yet the nature of social media is that these posts are also frozen in time and made available and searchable. As can be seen in the meme example on the right, in which An Gearasdan replaces Kazakhstan, there is a hashtag #AnGearasdan which makes this controversy and its many entries easily accessible years later. Thus writing which is by nature of the moment transcends its brief shelf life, and becomes, as long as X remains online, a lasting text on the power and significance of everyday writing in the revitalisation of Gaelic, where tweets can help to “destroy a vulnerable heritage”, but can be partially neutralised through the use of the meme as a genre of quotidian representation.

Similarly, social media is used by the recorders of nature in their conservation efforts. For them too, the everyday texts of social media are not neutral representations without effect in the physical world: they are in fact well known to pose particular risks for vulnerable wildlife. Evelyn, whom we met on the headland recording storm petrels, keeps her eye on
these posts and does her best to reduce their impact. For instance, certain birds are likely to be victimised or disturbed in various ways should the details of their whereabouts be made present. This is particularly true in the case of birds of prey, who are in turn preyed upon by various groups: egg collectors steal eggs for their collections, chicks are abducted and sold for falconry, well-meaning tourists and birders disturb nests to get photographs, or, potentially, unscrupulous landowners or farmers might deliberately damage or kill them to protect game species or livestock. As such, the Raptor Study Group are highly protective of their records and do not make public any data about nesting sites, unlike with other species. Evelyn says that on several occasions she has contacted people on twitter who have posted images of eagle nesting sites, asking them to take these pictures down as they can be used by others to put the birds at risk. For other species she adopts similar strategies on google reviews of wild camping locations:

In Ard Mhòr [on Barra], common gulls breed there, arctic terns breed there, and this year little terns have been breeding there, but I found on google maps there was a picture of someone's campervan out on the very end point and they were recommending it as a wild camping spot. I did my utmost and Google have actually removed that. There was another spot nearby that they haven't removed but I put a bad review on it, saying people shouldn't be walking out on the point and disturbing nesting birds, if they do they're likely to get fined under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

In this way, the everyday writing practices of tweeting about bird sightings or posting a review for other prospective wild campers become sites of discursive contestation: Evelyn reaches out to authors to remove their posts or appeals to editorial processes to have them removed by moderators. Failing that, she enters into the fray and adds her own negative reviews to bring down the overall rating of the wild camping spot in the hopes that this will discourage readers looking for a place to stop for the night, and adding in the sting of potential punitive consequences. In this way, certain kinds of everyday writing genres like Google Reviews can fix the natural world in time in a different way from merely recording it. Records might help to fix it by producing a representation which can then provide a baseline for what must be conserved, to maintain the landscape in the image of that representation.
A negative Google Review does the opposite: it maintains a space of positive natural value by representing it in a negative light, thus potentially a deliberate misrepresentation in text preserves a desirable reality on the ground.

**Conclusion**

The residents of Uist navigate the endangerment and preservation of their natural and cultural heritage through everyday literacy events. In these events, quotidian writing genres are used to produce records of the islands as they are or to engage in debates about how things ought to be. These events, and the written objects produced by them, might also prove to be reflective of broader inequities, such as the distortions of Gaelic names required by standardised forms. They might also be treated with a level of suspicion, or considered not to represent reality directly or straightforwardly. For both Gaelic and the natural environment, producing written records is considered an important part of the preservation process to make up for shortfalls in oral transmission. In the case of biodiversity, the information is too vast to be recorded reliably without the help of writing, and so any non-written evidence is considered to have limited truth value. In the case of Gaelic, the written word steps in where the oral tradition begins to falter: when Gaelic speakers emigrate to new places or decline in numbers, gaps appear in the chain of transmission and so written records are required to ensure that aspects of oral culture are not lost.

I have shown that the “oral tradition” has a troubled conceptual history and is more intertwined with written text than is commonly recognised. We have seen some of the ways in which contemporary Gaelic discourse tends towards a distrust of writing as a means to resist language shift. Following this, some examples have been drawn out to illustrate the texture of interaction with Gaelic writing in the texts of everyday life. These texts – forms, road signs, and memes – show us how forms of everyday writing which are nearly invisible in their ordinariness (forms and road signs) or by definition ephemeral and not designed to stand the test of time (memes) might through their generic requirements (in the case of forms) or the discourse surrounding them (in the case of road signs, illustrated by memes) act as ways in which a particular linguistic hierarchy can be subtly reinscribed or resisted. As
These examples suggest, names matter (as I will explore in more detail in the next chapter). They contain political, social, and cultural context and consequence.

It is also true that there is a sense within the Gaelic community that the written word is a powerful tool to hold back language shift, even if the discourse around the *Gaelic Crisis* has focused around the primacy of the vernacular spoken language. We can see that this does not manifest itself in all forms of everyday literacy events, such as for instance the lack of uptake of crofting paperwork in Gaelic. However, there is strong support (as well as opposition) for the use of Gaelic in bilingual signage as demonstrated in the Fort William affair. Road signs in this context are about something other than intelligibility. This is about performing a world where something like this is necessary for everyone to navigate, or one where you can be a monoglot and still get around. It is more about the fact of having been written than what precisely has been written. The gesture of writing then comes into the fore and it matters that these are written texts and not oral ones. This underlines the importance of the written word in bringing the right kind of world into existence, as there is in the sphere of nature conservation. We will see how this plays out throughout the thesis as literacy practices find themselves very much at the centre of the work of keeping Gaelic and the natural environment of Uist in a healthy state.

Environmental management is largely a practice of writing the world — producing large data sets, which then move through meeting minutes and into reports and action plans. They largely set themselves apart from the oral, in producing written evidence that is hard and objective in contradistinction to the unreliability of oral evidence. It makes use of everyday writing practices, producing meticulous records in an attempt to fix a textual version of the islands’ biodiversity in order to inspire policies to fix that biodiversity in physical form. They also make use of other forms of quotidian, unremarkable writing practices such as Google reviews or meeting minutes to produce impacts on the world.

There is a contrast between the textuality of nature and the textuality of Gaelic. Gaelic is seen as something that is better in the vernacular, oral, and problematic or inauthentic in text. Nature on the other hand is something that must be transformed into text in order to be operationalised. There is also an oral culture among the writers of nature, and one that
may be considered endangered by the demographics of an ageing population, much like Gaelic culture. As such it would be incorrect to draw a tight distinction between the preservation of Gaelic and the preservation of nature as being on opposite sides of the orality-writing binary. In the case of each set of concerns is a tension between reliance on and suspicion of the written word, a recognition of its power but also of what gets lost in translation.

A focus on the everyday writing practices in particular illustrates something that looking at published texts would not. There is a tradition of Gaelic writing in many genres, as discussed above, and so if we were to look at all texts we might say that Gaelic has a very healthy literary culture which does significant work to entextualise and thus preserve it. What it does not have for many people, as this has shown, is a strong culture of quotidian literacy practices. Unlike the natural environment then, the daily minutiae of Gaelic life are not being assiduously recorded in writing. So where preservation is concerned, the problem might not only be, then, about the “language people think in their own heads” but the language they write in their paperwork. This may have important consequences: if Gaelic is not commonly used as a textual medium in the everyday description of reality, then it is excluded from certain writing practices and literacy events that help to construct the world (note that the social media debates about road signage take place themselves in English). In that sense, the continued perception of Gaelic as an oral language that one thinks in one’s own head and speaks at the market, but does not write, may have serious consequences for its perceived place in the future of Scotland.

This chapter makes what is perhaps a simple set of propositions: namely that the act of writing is central to practices of preservation in contemporary Uist, but that when we compare the relation of writing to the natural environment and to Gaelic language and heritage, we can see that this linguistic practice has varying resonances and levels of efficacy in different spheres, and that different attitudes towards writing as a preserver of reality might help to explain part of the disjuncture between Gaelic revitalisation and nature conservation. However it has been important in that it sets the scene for what follows where I return again and again to the writing practices, written objects, and literacy events that characterise the textures of preservation in the islands and where I consider different
forms of language practices and the ways in which they are employed to call different versions of the world into being. In the next chapter, I turn to species taxonomy and the relationship that Linnean taxonomy has with the Gaelic language. Here I consider a number of texts, within which the practices of naming and translation are considered for their role in worldbuilding. In Chapter Six, the performative power of predicting as a linguistic mode will be considered, again with reference to a number of texts and models.
CHAPTER FOUR

“Once my paper is out, there will be a difference”: Translating Taxonomies and Naming the World

Introduction: Columba Livia/Rock Dove/Pigeon/Calman
Creige/Calman Mara/Smùdan

When I first met the rock dove researchers I was sitting in my landlord’s living room one afternoon talking about his efforts to prevent the practice of deep-ploughing on the machair. He was telling me that because the soil there is thin and underlain only by sand (and centuries of buried refuse), ploughs over a certain length churn the soil and sand together so it blows away, accelerating dune erosion and making the land unfit for use. While he was explaining this, a knock on the door brought in two young men who wanted access to my one of my landlord’s barns in the township where I lived so that they could conduct research on some rock doves that were living there. Thus while I was engaged in my own acts of classifying and naming the socioenvironmental controversies of the machair, I happened to come into contact with another class of researcher engaged in their own work of classification. It was a sobering confrontation with the reality of the islands and islanders as objects of intensive and near-constant research efforts based in elite institutions on the mainland. In the course of being interviewed by one researcher my landlord found himself with a queue of other scholars at the door. After their exchange I ran out after them to ask if I could tag along on their next expedition.

The next morning I headed out from my house on foot, going to meet them in a place they described as “the ruin in the field” – a description that could apply to at least five or six structures in the township. I noticed them across a field at one such ruin, and not interpreting their gesticulations to be quiet, I called out to them. Several birds flew out, startled. However, the researchers were confident there were more inside the house so my faux-pas was not, in the end, disastrous. I stood by as they strapped nets to their backs, deftly vaulted a gate, and disappeared into the house. A moment later, more of what I
would previously have described as pigeons fluttered away and the two researchers, appeared with their prize: a bird in a net. They explained to me that they were carrying out research on Uist’s population of rock doves, as these were potentially the only non-hybridised population left in the UK.

“In Orkney, where we’re going next week, they’re all hybrids. The rock dove doesn’t exist anymore really,” said one of the researchers. “The Outer Hebrides is potentially the last big population of pure rock doves. Although we don’t like to use the word ‘pure.’”

“Why not?” I asked.

“It sounds a bit Nazi-ish.”

Observations on the power of scientific language to reinforce fascist political worldviews aside, the researchers were setting out to find evidence that the rock doves of Uist constitute a different subspecies from the common feral pigeon. They have some “unofficial” differences, mainly in the coloration: common pigeons have a much higher degree of colour variation, while the rock dove is uniform:

Officially there’s no way of telling the difference between a rock dove and a pigeon, but they are different. I mean nobody’s looked yet, but now we’ve looked and measured them. Once my paper is out, there will be a difference, but now there’s not.

It was thus an act in producing difference through naming, as there are many in the birding community deny that there are any true rock doves left (Bird Guides 2022). By studying the birds’ plumage phenotypes and examining their genomes, the researchers hoped to demonstrate that these were not in fact pigeons, but rock doves. I find the language used suggestive of the world-building power of scientific practices of naming: prior to the study, there is no difference, but “once my paper is out, there will be a difference”. The publication of the study produces that difference. The birds could then be translated through the conferral of a new Latin binomial into a new type of animal. The results of the study have now been published and established the Outer Hebrides population of the rock dove as having so little genetic introgression from mainland feral pigeon genomes as to be of
“conservation significance” (Smith et al. 2022). When I spoke to them in 2021, the researchers were not certain that their aim would be to establish some kind of conservation area for rock doves by excluding pigeons – “we can’t just come here and demand: ‘you cannot keep pigeons’”. However, as they point out, there is a precedent for such areas being established in the islands for the protection of red deer from sika deer, and a form of wild honey bee in the inner Hebrides. Furthermore if the study claims that the rock doves are of conservation importance, it may be that their insistence on distinct naming of these birds leads to a policy of active exclusion for their mainland cousins. As such the translation of the pigeons into rock doves produces them as an object of conservation, with consequences for any feral pigeons that might find their way to the Outer Hebrides.

As a coda to this vignette, I ask what if we were to try to translate this research into Gaelic? The Gaelic words for the rock dove are calman-creige or calman-mara – the former a direct translation from the English, literally meaning rock dove or rock pigeon, and the latter meaning sea dove or sea pigeon. The word “calman” does not distinguish between pigeon and dove, which would make a translation of the above described research difficult. Dwelly’s Gaelic dictionary does, however, list further options: there is columan, which makes the Latin root’s (columba) connection to the Gaelic word clearer, but also smúdan, which Dwelly provides to mean any kind of avian musical note, a turtle, or either the rock dove, or wood pigeon which is otherwise calman fiadhaich or calman coille (wild dove/pigeon or literally wood dove/pigeon). This may be further complicated by the fact that calman fiadhaich/coille may also refer to the collared dove. Thus Gaelic would make it difficult to render the distinction between dove and pigeon clear.

This story about what we can call a rock dove sets the scene for a wider examination of naming practices in relation to the natural environment, as well as of the translation of these names. It builds on the previous chapter’s exploration of the power of the written word to exert effects upon the living world, along with the various problems of its ability to distort things and alienate writers and readers from their experience. The chapter considers a variety of documents and documenting practices to offer an account of the species concept in Uist and how it plays out in the entextualisation of the islands’ biodiversity across and within linguistic boundaries. Gaelic scholar Michael Newton, in observing that “words
are not discrete units but bundles of associations which seldom correspond to those of words in other languages”, describes a sense of “dissatisfaction” at the work of writing in translation as “double entendres and deliberate ambiguities in the original require tediously long explanations” (Newton 2019, xv). Much of this chapter involves the excavation of such “tedious” linguistic quirks, as well as what may come across as grammatical nit-picking. However it is my contention that what falls through the cracks between languages is better seen as a resource for understanding the relationship between those languages than it is as a tedious exercise in academic fussiness.

A core question here is: what happens when biodiversity meets linguistic diversity? Gaelic presents an interesting case study for the translation of scientific classificatory logics, since as a minority language it is not typically used to convey scientific information, and while it is widely appreciated for its breadth of vocabulary to describe the natural world, this comes largely in the context of the picturesque. Poetic descriptions historically dominate in the discussion of Gaelic and nature, in contrast to the precision of species-based Linnaean taxonomy. As we will see, however, this tendency is by no means universal, and there have been many attempts to integrate Gaelic with biological language, and to compile Gaelic taxonomies.

I argue that by examining species naming practices, it is possible to get a sense of where Gaelic falls within a linguistic hierarchy of truthful representation: i.e. in the world of taxonomy, Latin is traditionally the linguistic standard in accuracy, followed by English names, and the Gaelic name is considered the least useful within dominant practices of naming the world. As seen in the above vignette, the translation of these rock doves officially into Latin nomenclature as a defined species creates new value in these animals, and potentially has conservation implications: thus the phrasing of a phenomenon in a particular language might have consequences for the way we value it. I argue that the inverse is also true: that value is created for a language when it is used to express certain things. If scientific information is translated into a particular language, it impacts the contexts in which that language can be used, and produces extra value for that language within modernist governance structures. Specifically, we will see how this plays out for Gaelic, as efforts are made to translate the Linnaean taxonomy into Gaelic, or to make use
of Gaelic environmental vocabulary for neoliberal forms of environmental governance. By examining the practices of naming, and of translating those practices, one can better understand the imagined place of Gaelic within nature conservation, and the relationship between the two comes into sharper focus.

In this chapter, I first consider theoretical approaches to naming and translating. I follow this with an account of Gaelic environmental lexicography, taking into account a number of written objects in which Gaelic and Linnaean taxonomies collide or in which Linnaean taxonomy is translated into Gaelic. These texts help to illuminate the motivations behind efforts to bring together two taxonomic systems on a theoretical level, and the value such translations is considered to have for both Gaelic and the natural environment. Following this, I return to the literacy practices of the everyday, and through three more birds I examine how problems of naming and translating the natural world play out in the vernacular: in these examples we will see how Gaelic-speakers and taxonomists alike relate to the standardised naming of species, and how Gaelic is incorporated into nature conservation texts in practice.

**Naming and Translating**

Before delving into the written objects and writing practices in question, it is worth thinking through some of these problems of naming and translating on a theoretical level. That language is constitutive of reality is an anthropological commonplace: the structure of the language one is in the habit of using influences one’s perception and understanding of the environment (Whorf, 1959). But this is not a neutral process, nor is it one that is beyond the capacity of particular social and political interests to influence. One pathway through which such capacities can be channelled is the act of naming. Bourdieu observes that “there is no social agent who does not aspire...to have the power to name and to create the world through naming” (Bourdieu, 1991: 105). For Bourdieu, as for many others, the ability to designate official representations of reality is closely linked with the power of the state, and state formation itself requires a “unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language”, which “becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured”. Linguistic domination is produced through the production of a
singular linguistic community, which is “endlessly reproduced by institutions capable of imposing universal recognition of the dominant language” (ibid.: 45): thus the language whose names for things are customarily used over those of other languages is the dominant language. Onomastics, the field of linguistics concerned with names and naming, has seen increasing developments in an understanding of the political power of names (see Puzey and Kostanski, 2016; Vuolteenaho and Berg, 2009). This insight will be at the centre of my observations in this chapter, which examines linguistic hierarchies through a particular practice of naming: biological taxonomy, its translation across languages, and the kinds of linguistic and natural worlds that these practices build.

Of course an understanding of the power behind different sorts of utterances has also been a central anthropological theme, and translation is no different. Di Giminiani and Haines (2020) have conceptualised the work of translation as it relates to the production of natural resources: that is, rethinking the self-evidence of natural resources as available for exploitation that has defined thinking on the subject, a rubric of translation allows us to see the ways in which beings, bodies and substances can be (literally) borne across – etymologically trans-lated – into new contexts, transformed through processes which imbue them with new meanings and symbols. This approach to translation relates to Michel Callon’s (1984) “sociology of translation” as a material-symbolic process of world-building whereby different possibilities of interaction with the natural environment emerge as different entities are translated into different schemes of classification. The semantic thus produces conditions for the possible (Cahill, 2020). Here it will be instructive to think about the ways in which things might be transformed into resources through processes of translation not just between different classificatory systems but between languages: what new values might emerge from natural phenomena via the process of reformulating a description of them in another language? How might this reformulation produce new value for the language itself? The languages from and to which a word is translated are not neutral, pre-existing fields of signification. Rather they are actively constituted through acts of translation, and as such are themselves transformed by the transformations of other things through translation work in their idioms. Importantly, as Di Giminiani and Haines remind us, translation is always patchy and inconsistent, with moments of incoherence and incompatibility emerging in efforts to render disparate objects tidily coherent and
compatible. These spaces of incompatibility may reveal ontological differences, the resilience of local environmental understandings in the face of dominant translations, or the ways in which such imposed translations may erode sovereignty.

At the heart of this chapter is a discussion of the species concept. Despite being subject to much debate as to whether it effectively describes the reality of diverse animal lives, species is the building block around which most biodiversity-based conservation builds itself. Indeed the species concept forms the corner stone of a variety of techniques of panoptic biopolitical surveillance – it “cuts up the flux of wildlife to create a practical set of units for action” (Lorimer, 2015: 59). Anthropologists and other scholars from across the social sciences and humanities have been critical of the species concept for the ways in which it organises both human and nonhuman life and maintains hierarchies. For Tsing, the species concept represents a form of generalisation at the centre of the production of a global Nature. Through species taxonomy, the differences between seemingly variant phenomena (i.e. the sheer diversity of living beings) become compatible within a single framework of understanding, which “allows transcendence: the general can rise above the particular” (Tsing, 2005: 89). This process of standardisation through naming has everything to do with European colonial expansion around the globe as the “folk botanies of Europe could not incorporate the wealth of unfamiliar plants that were being described from Asia, Africa, and the New World” (ibid.: 90). Gradually, colonial botanists came to see themselves as communing directly with plants, erasing the collaborations with indigenous peoples that enabled the collection of knowledge and classification that produced the universal Nature through matchmaking organisms with their appropriate Latin names, the “touchstone of biodiversity discourse” (bid.: 95). Thus linked with processes of colonial control, Haraway tells us: “species reeks of race and sex” (Haraway, 2008: 18). Species is then deeply implicated within power and politics, in that the use of Latin taxonomy has come to be a central pillar of colonial ontologies, the truest linguistic means of representing the nonhuman.

Work has been done to reconsider what we mean by species. For Van Dooren, a species is best thought of not as an abstraction denoted by Linnaean classifications but better thought of as a way of life – what is passed on and maintains the species thus is not codified genetic
material but practices and customs. This forms a major work in the growing corpus of the Environmental Humanities: a domain of thinking that inhabits multispecies worlds in the belief that it is vital for us to “relearn the world and our place in it” (2014: loc. 2366). It opposes itself to a worldview of separated nature and culture: “The world is far messier and more interesting than this. And so the tools of ethnography and philosophy are required to develop a fuller picture of the entangled significance of extinction, of its myriad meanings and the diverse ways in which it matters” (2014: loc. 2440).

On the subject of naming, Ingold (2021) points out the commonly held distinction between two forms of noun: appellatives, which refers to a class of entities (i.e. regular nouns), and names, referring to a unique individual (i.e. proper nouns). The possession of proper nouns is conferred to humans or aspects of the nonhuman world deemed to be defined by their subordination to human interests, e.g. places or pets, “bearing witness, in the western imagination, to the history of humanity’s colonisation and appropriation of nature” (Ingold, 2021: 202). To be human, then, is to have a name and to occupy named space, and the distinction between classification and proper naming upholds an anthropocentric and colonial knowledge system: things may be classified, but only humans and their extensions named. The species concept and taxonomy thereby uphold human exceptionalism and the nature/culture divide. Ingold instead calls us to imagine a dissolution of this distinction in which “the knowledge conveyed by names is storied knowledge” and each name becomes “a condensation of that story” (ibid. 205).

Ingold cites the ethnography of the Koyukon people, in which many names for animals encode a story about that animal, which is in some way referenced and thus retold by the customary actions of the animal in question: their names are thus storied. The invitation is to think of animal names not as objectifying nouns, but as verbs that denote the ongoing action of the animal in question: “speaking its name is part of the process by which language itself is brought to life: the animal can be animaling in a language that is languaging” (ibid., 213). It is not my suggestion that we might find in Uist or in Gaelic an ontological rift with the classificatory environmental logic of Western European taxonomy. The naming of animals then can be thought of as a particular form of storytelling everywhere. As in many places and languages, the names of animals encode the multispecies stories of Uist. Their
use maintains and retells these stories, allowing for the animal to animal alongside humans in a locally specific way, but also for Gaelic to language in its own particular way. What are the stories encoded in the naming practices of Uist and the names themselves? When we speak an animal’s name in Gaelic, or English, or Latin, what kinds of languaging are enabled by this verbalisation of animaling? This chapter interrogates practices of naming the natural world in Uist, tracing paths and politics of the species concept as it passes back and forth across linguistic borders.

Species-based taxonomy has attracted some critique from the social sciences and humanities as a means of naming the world, and this chapter interrogates what happens to the species concept when it crosses linguistic boundaries. What is at stake here? In *Decolonising Methodologies*, Smith argues that “by naming the world people name their realities. For communities there are realities which can only be found in the indigenous language” (1999, 157-158). There are many instances in which a particular natural philosophy is encoded in Gaelic lexicon. For instance, here are significant overlaps between vocabulary to describe the human body and trees, reflecting a broad understanding of the mirroring of human and natural worlds in Gaelic tradition (Newton 2019, 290), a dendric metaphor further developed in the concept of the Gaelic tree alphabet, in which each letter of written Gaelic is associated with a particular native tree species. What might be lost by the changes wrought on a language by the constituting practice of translation? It is worth quoting Sharon Macdonald at length:

“Gaelic is being brought into the modern world – and rightly so, it might be argued. However, the dilemma here is that Gaelic could end up as simply an alternative set of labels – or a code – for an English or perhaps more generally European or ‘Western’ way of seeing, rather than offering an alternative ‘window’ onto the world, as it has sometimes been claimed to do. We could find ourselves in a paradoxical situation where, as ever more Gaelic terms are devised to cope with the contingencies of modern life, new technologies and so forth, a distinctive Gaelic way of perceiving and experiencing the world – a distinctive Gaelic system of perceiving and experiencing the world – might slip away.”
This comes within an essay entitled *A bheil am feur gorm fhathast?*, a title deliberately defying direct translation. It means both “is the grass still green” and, as it would increasingly be translated by many speakers, “is the grass still blue”. Traditionally, Gaelic speakers would refer to grass as being “gorm”, which is now conventionally translated as “blue”, while “uaine” is the word most often used to map on to the English “green”. As a result of language shift and increased bilingualism, speakers are now more likely to refer to grass as being uaine, instead of gorm. What Macdonald points out is that the Gaelic colour system does not map neatly onto the colour spectrum in the way that English colours do. Rather, words refer to other qualities of colour, such as depth of hue. Thus the words “gorm” and “uaine” less accurately describe an object’s colour in terms of the frequencies of light which it reflects along a particular spectrum, but other qualities. However, the linguistic dominance of English has caused Gaelic speakers to adjust their Gaelic so that it maps more neatly onto English. The culturally mediated perception of colour becomes fundamentally altered, as the defining feature of colour shifts from its depth of hue to its position along the spectrum of light. Through the language used to describe an experience of the environment, we can see how the particular reality that Gaelic vocabulary encodes becomes altered in its encounter with Anglophone ways of seeing. This leads from the tendency within a bilingual society to translate directly back and forth from the idioms of the dominant language. Might we expect that Gaelic encounters with the species concept as a classificatory logic should similarly produce a shift in models for understanding the natural environment?

In what follows I discuss the circulation of Gaelic vocabulary for describing the natural world. This includes a consideration of texts such as dictionaries or subject specific glossaries of terms for animals, plants, and other features of the non-human world. There will also be consideration of texts which, while not solely works of lexicography, have a significant lexicographic component: i.e. they deal with the connection of placenames to Gaelic words describing features of the place, or pioneer the translation of particular subjects hitherto not often seen in Gaelic and as such lead to the creation of new vocabulary or creative repurposing of existing vocabulary. In many of these texts it will become clear...
that there are a number of things at stake in the production of resources aimed, presumably, at facilitating the use of Gaelic to describe the natural world. These have to do with the question of whether Gaelic is suitable for the task of doing so, and in what context. This tension emerges in questions of its competition or coexistence with English as the language of science, of classification. For some, the production of Gaelic vocabularies is primarily an ethnological exercise aimed at the recuperation or preservation of a particular lifeworld through the documentation of its language. Related to this is the sense that this lifeworld is endangered (discussed elsewhere in this thesis), as well as a certain nostalgic picturesque appreciation for the language — vocabularies of nature are useful for enabling an appreciation of Gaelic song and poetry, and the richness of nature vocabulary therein. For others, Gaelic is positioned as internal to scientific modernity, and not external to it: Gaelic is appreciated on an ethnological and aesthetic level, but is also argued to be useful within technoscientific paradigms, and suitable for discourse within such paradigms.

**A Survey of Gaelic Environmental Lexicography**

If Gaelic can be put to use within paradigms of environmental knowledge, how has this come to be understood? In this section I trace the history of efforts to collate, standardise, develop, or operationalise the Gaelic language for modernist ecological purposes. I begin with the development of Gaelic lexicography in general, trace this through to subject specific environmental glossaries, and then move on to provide examples of how such glossaries have been put to work in recent years.

The creation of English-Gaelic dictionaries, as with many similar operations in other European minority language contexts, has its roots in the control and eradication of perceived ignorance and superstition in schools. In the Scottish case, these were run by the Society in Scotland for Promoting Christian knowledge, who saw it as part of their strategy of “rooting out their Irish language” in the 18th and 19th centuries (Considine 2016, 210). The later development of Gaelic lexicography came to be related less to social control and more to the recovery and appreciation of Gaelic poetry and song. Later still, John Paterson, the leader of the Gaelic league of Scotland, wrote in 1964 that “no attempt has hitherto been made to form a vocabulary to keep pace with the march of science or industry, to
develop a modern literature or to stem the flood of corrupt Anglicisms which are now passing as Gaelic. This is the task to which those who love their country and its language must now address themselves” (MacLeod and Newton 2019, 556). In this formulation, the production of a Gaelic lexicon for description of scientific phenomena is a matter not only of urgent linguistic preservation but also a nationalistic duty.

I here offer a brief survey of some key works of Gaelic glossaries of the natural world. The development of lexicography across Europe in the 17th century owed much to the fieldwork methods of natural history, and often went hand-in-hand with the collection of natural and environmental lexicon (see Considine 2016, 99-106). There is a body of work on Gaelic words for the natural environment, mainly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Within each of these works we can see a tension emerging between the usefulness of such documents, which have important ramifications for the usefulness of the language itself, and what it is best suited to describing.

A relatively early example is *Gaelic Names of Beasts (Mammalia), Birds, Fishes, Insects, Reptiles, Etc.*, written in 1905 by Alexander Robert Forbes, from Skye. It begins with an untranslated and impassioned plea (in Gaelic) to Gaelic speakers to maintain the language and also to aid in the effort of compiling a list of animals, which the author admits is incomplete in the form which he has compiled. In the English introduction, Forbes explains that in his lexical work he does not seek to use “scientific vocabulary” or “classical nomenclature” which we might take to mean Linnaean species classification: such classification, he argues, is obstructive of “acquiring a familiar knowledge” of the subject. Rather, the “bare names” contain “almost always more truth” than the “apparently more precise and hard definitions of science.” As he puts it, “common sense is the genius of mankind, and what is generally accepted as the general human and popular sense of words is what I think should be studied” (Forbes, 1905: xv). Forbes takes a poetic approach to the study of nature, characterising this as being the way of the “Celtic natural historian” – for him a love of poetry and a closeness to nature being the natural state of the Celt (ibid.: xvi). As such, in this early work, we see an explicit placement of the Celtic language as external or even opposed to the developing biological discourse of the time.
This attitude seems to hold true in the lexicographic work of Alexander Carmichael, best known for his ethnological collection *Carmina Gadelica*. In his study of Alexander Carmichael’s role in the collection of Gaelic bird names, naturalist Ap Rheinallt argues that for a reader of bird names in Gaelic poetry, it is

“not essential for the reader to know exactly which species the name denotes. It is quite sufficient for him or her to have a general understanding. And if Gaelic-speakers assign a specific name to a bird that they know, it makes no difference to them whether or not it can be translated into any other language.”

(Ap Rheinallt, 2010: 49)

On the other hand, for the ornithologist, a

“Gaelic name is not reliable unless it is known which species it refers to. Usually this means that it is necessary to look at the English translation, because English bird names have been standardised for a long time. Some of the Gaelic names, on the other hand, have fallen into disuse and there may be doubts over them.”

(ibid.: 50).

For Ap Rheinallt, the ornithological data may not be absolutely correct, but it provides nonetheless a sense of the way that Carmichael’s interlocutors interacted with the natural world. This is a common thread throughout much of the literature on Gaelic names for nonhuman nature, that it is imprecise, requires validation through reference to English, but has a use value in its own terms. This value is located less in its ability to participate in a universalised visualisation of a global nature via Linnaean taxonomy, and more in the phenomenological world encountered by the Gael.

Indeed much of the lexicography of Gaelic is aimed at both a valorisation and rescue of Gaelic linguistic culture. In the introduction of his edited dictionary of vocabulary from South Uist and Eriskay collected by the Rev. Fr. Allan MacDonald, Campbell observes that from the vocabulary collected, the life of 19th century islanders comes into sharp focus, traditions which “Gaels preserved in spite of poverty, oppression and the official
persecution of their language, the tradition which lay behind their thoughts” (1991: 3). The edited lexicon produced from MacDonald’s notes is structured as a standard dictionary first, but then is followed with lists of terms grouped in categories, e.g. animal cries, parts of animals, varieties of seaweed, in an explicit effort to “illustrate the wealth and flexibility of the Gaelic language, as spoken by the old generation in the Hebrides” (ibid.). There are numerous such regional dictionaries available for different islands and areas of the highlands, e.g. MacNeill’s (1910) vocabulary of Colonsay, with a focus on place names and environmental vocabulary. Such texts are largely ethnological exercises aimed at preserving a threatened worldview, and do not make much consideration of the scientific import of the vocabulary gathered.

While much discussion of Gaelic nature vocabulary has tended to stress a disjuncture between Gaelic environmental sensibilities and scientific awareness, this has not always been the case. Cameron’s *Gaelic Names of Plants* (1883) is so-named with a subtitle reading “Collected and arranged in scientific order, with notes on their etymology, their uses, plant superstitions, etc. among the Celts, with copious Gaelic, English, and scientific indices”: it thus emphasises itself as a piece of scientific literature, although it does also have a strong ethnological element. The book sees itself as making “scientific and philological” contributions “before it became too late by the gradual disappearance of the language” (1883: viii). It makes use of ethnological theories about the naming practices of the “Celts”-plants were named by appearance, use, habitat, or superstitious association - in order to make botanical conclusions about the identity of a given plant. This dictionary proceeds according to Linnaean classification, arranged according to the Latin name, which is then translated into English, and followed by the Gaelic name and associated information on its etymology, lore, and use. There is no list of words presented according to Gaelic. This perhaps represents a linguistic hierarchy that comes alongside an avowedly “scientific” approach: in this early work which acknowledges the usefulness of Gaelic for scientific naming, the study remains most firmly situated within a framework that prioritises universalising Latin names. This ordering of language perhaps has a strong relationship with the mission statement of the book being the gathering of linguistic material before it disappears (cf MacDonald, 2011): the usefulness of the work is primarily for the English-speaking expert in botany who for one reason or another wishes to know the “local” name
of a particular species, and not for the Gaelic speaker seeking to situate their own linguistic knowledge within a Linnaean paradigm. Contrast this to Dwelly’s *Illustrated Gaelic to English Dictionary*, widely considered to be the authoritative Gaelic dictionary, also contains the Linnaean species name of plants and animals as well as the English translation, and in most cases an illustration, but the dictionary only arranges words according to Gaelic-English.

A more recent but similar work from 1999 is Clark and Donaldson’s *Ainmean Gaelic Lusan/Gaelic Names of Plants*. This is a trilingual glossary containing the English and Gaelic vernacular names alongside the Linnaean classification. Also in contrast, the scientific expertise of the authors is emphasised in the foreword, describing Clark as “no self-appointed ‘floral godmother,’ but a deeply committed botanist” (Clark and Donaldson, 1999: iv). Similarly to Forbes, the authors of this book’s Foreword, folklorist Margaret Bennett situates the project of a list of names within an imagined Gaelic disposition. She observes that as people “who live close to the land,” Gaels are “inclined to name the plants that surround us, for how else can we make reference to their importance or draw comparisons between one place and another” (ibid.: iii). Bennett speaks fondly of memories of “brows[ing] through Dwelly’s *Dictionary* in search of a wild flower of plant”: this underlines the importance of texts produced by historical collectors of Gaelic lore and lexicon in the mindset of contemporary Gaels in relation to their language. The book under discussion was then produced “sensing the danger that Gaelic names once so common were being supplanted by English substitutes” (ibid.: iii). It was produced in consultation with a variety of Gaelic-speakers and is placed in the context of existing works in English, Welsh and Irish to “promote stability in the use of vernacular names” (ibid. vi). It is thus a work aiming towards later standardisation and homogenisation as much as of documentation: variant spellings have not been included, although it should be noted that names which “seem to have arisen as a result of their being confused with words that sound similar but meant something quite different” have been left in, with the intention of “their fate being decided” at a later date (ibid.: vii). Similarly to Forbes’s work, the introduction to *Ainmean Gaelic Lusan* contains a short, untranslated Gaelic section which exhorts Gaelic speakers to carry on the task of producing a comprehensive Gaelic vocabulary for plants. This therefore follows on from the tradition of a politicised lexicography, while also making efforts to intervene in language use, more than simply documenting it.
Also published in 1999, Garvie’s *Gaelic Names of Plants, Animals and Fungi* explains the rationale for the compilation of scattered biological lexicon: “it was felt that some attempt should be made to sort out the information available before it was locked away in archives” (1999: 6). This is an interesting turn of phrase, which diverts from the usual way of describing the loss of cultural material, that it would be lost to history. The implication is that once something is archived, it becomes unavailable, which tells us much about the relationship between the people of the Gàidhealtachd and those who have collected their ethnological material. She points out that the 19th century, when many of the existing sources of environmental word lists were compiled, was also a time at which many organisms which are not obvious to the casual human observer, were first named in any language, and some of these have seeped into Gaelic, while those names with no apparent link to Latin or English names are assumed to have been recognised as useful to people of “earlier times”, although there is recognition that there were likely once words (now assumed lost) for common organisms or groups of organisms without direct use-value (Cf Macdonald 1999). Furthermore, the loss of some dialect words for particular species is regarded in this text as being necessary and inevitable in the facilitation of communication, if regrettable, as “selection and simplification has occurred with English as well as Gaelic names” (ibid.). The text is then also one which aims at a standardisation, problematically for those with a keen interest in preserving a linguistic diversity of the language through promotion of regional dialect.

Thus as we have seen, the practice of Gaelic nature lexicography has traced a line from early works which tend to focus less on precision and aim for a preservation of a threatened heritage. This is mostly done with an attitude that this does not have a strong relationship to natural science, but is primarily an ethnological exercise. This exercise was also fundamentally in many cases considered to have a political impact, seen in the impassioned pleas to Gaels to use the words compiled and contribute to further compilation efforts. In later efforts, the move is more toward explicit scientific efforts, and collaborations between scholars of Gaelic, fluent speakers, and biologists. These works also often cite a political need to use the language lest it disappear, but they also show a further practical aim in their works of translation. They seek to standardise, root out the diversity of local words, and
thus enable a common linguistic code to emerge for scientific discourse in Gaelic. Thus the process of translating a form of thinking about and classifying the natural world into another language accompanies a practical reformulation of the language itself: the logic of species classification, a standardisation of difference in the natural world, accompanies a standardisation of a language which does not easily bear such homogenisation. This form of lexicography then, uses a textual practice not only to preserve the language, but also to alter it in order to render it valuable for discourse with scientific modernity, to translate it into a lexical resource for the naming and classification of the world.

**Lexicography in Practice 1: Three Texts**

I now turn to considering three works which, though not glossaries or dictionaries, represent important departures in the development of Gaelic as a language of science: one in its contribution to translating science into Gaelic, and one whose import comes through its translation of Gaelic into science. One notable work subverting the tendency towards the picturesque is MacLeòid and MacThòmais’s 1976 *Bith-Eolas: A Chealla, Gintinneachd, is Mean-Fhàs* (*Biology: The Cell, Genetics and Evolution*: essentially a biology textbook. This work contains a glossary of terms at the end, many new coinages in Gaelic, including a variety of words relating to the three aspects of biology covered by the book – as the title suggests, the cell, genetics and evolution. The book sets out to discuss these aspects of biology, written in English by a biologist at the University of Newcastle, Ronald MacLeod, and translated into Gaelic. In the English foreword, MacLeod notes that scientific topics must be studied in relation to “their relevance to the human situation”, and as such the book aims to some extent to situate science within highland contexts and interests. For example, its discussion of population genetics uses the example of the genetic relatedness of Icelandic people and “Celtic” people (meaning Irish and Highland Scots in this context) emanating from Viking population movements, and situates this relatedness in relation to ideas of Celtic ethnicity and language: “is dòcha gu bheil Innis Tilich an là an diugh de stoc Cheilteach, ged nach e cànan Ceilteach a th’aca” [Icelanders of today may be of Celtic stock, even though they do not have a Celtic language] (MacLeòid and MacThòmais, 1976: 65). The text continues to explain the genetics of blood types through narratives about the early development and spread of Celtic languages and peoples in Scotland. There is as such an
articulation of genetic Celtic-ness as distinct from the gene pool of England within this work of Gaelic science: the translation of biological understanding of the world into Gaelic comes alongside a translation of Gaelic understandings of the world into biology. In the Gaelic foreword, MacThòmais, the translator, tells us:

When Ronald MacLeod sent me the first chapters he had written on the subject of biology so I could translate them into Gaelic, we had very little writing indeed in our own language on the subject. But I was always strongly of the opinion that Gaelic is very capable of taking new things into itself, and it was the pitiful history of the past three hundred years that were keeping us back in this way, and steering us so often to old fashioned perspectives and practices. [translation my own]

(MacLeòid and MacThòmais, 1972: 10)

The work is a significant achievement in this sense, and its translation of scientific concepts into Gaelic is a clear departure from many previous approaches taken to Gàidhlig nature lexicography: rather than collecting lists of words in an attempt to salvage lost lifeworlds, as we find in works such as Campbell (1958), this is an effort to put a Gaelic spin on global science. What we have here is an articulation different from some of the work which posits the usefulness of Gaelic for scientific knowledge in order to carve out and justify a place for the language within governance frameworks that prize technical knowledge: here rather is an attempt to make scientific knowledge useful for Gaelic instead of the other way around. It is also an unusual case among the lexicography literature, in that it is not ostensibly a work of lexicography, but a science textbook. However since it is not presenting new scientific research I would argue that its true contribution is its vocabulary.15

The second piece of work is a text written primarily in English, and while not a work of lexicography, provides a framework for utilising Gaelic vocabulary in a scientific context. In

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15 On that note I have departed from the conventions of citation for this work to highlight what I see as its true import. Conventional citation practice would have me list MacLeòid as the author and the sole name in in-text citations, while MacThòmais, the translator, would only see his name appear in the references list. This strikes me as unjust and so I include MacThòmais as an author of the text in my citations.
2021, NatureScot produced a commissioned report by Ruairidh MacIlleathain (or Roddy MacLean), a well-known Gaelic broadcaster and naturalist, entitled: *Ecosystem Services and Gaelic: A Scoping Exercise*. This report focuses on nature vocabulary in placenames and contrary to previous literature on the Gaelic environmental lexicon which emphasises its picturesque and poetic value, MacLean pilots a framework for the operationalisation of such vocabulary alongside a concept popular in environmental economics, and increasingly gaining traction in conservation: ecosystem services. These are defined in the report as “the many and varied benefits accruing to human beings, individually and collectively, from properly functioning ecosystems, and from a balanced and sustainable natural environment” (MacLean 2021, 3). The ecosystem services concept is a core framework for the valuation of features of the natural environment in terms that can be made commensurable with human economic action. Ecological features are conceptualised as providing “services” for humans and other organisms: for example, food-producing plants provide “provisioning services” while the production of oxygen and carbon sequestration by trees can be thought of as “regulating services”. The natural environment can also provide “cultural” or “spiritual” services through the provision of spaces which are aesthetically pleasing, enable recreation, or facilitate experiences of the sublime and/or have specific resonances within a given spiritual tradition. The ecosystem services framework has been widely critiqued as bringing about a utilitarian and instrumental relationship between humanity and nature, subjecting the environment to a neoliberal market logic (see e.g Kolinjivadi et al., 2019).

The report proposes the study of Gaelic toponymy as a method to identify ecosystem services which may be utilised. For instance, the presence of the word cluain (meadow or pasture) can indicate a suitability for animal husbandry in currently unused places, while Eas a’ Bhradain (Waterfall of the) Salmon is a placename that implies the presence of salmon (MacLean, 2021: 14). Certain words are flagged as especially significant for exploitation, for example ròn (seal): “In some regards, this is probably the most significant toponymic element in terms of marking marine productivity. Seals as predators require a productive ecosystem to support them” (ibid., 15). Placenames which imply the former presence of tree cover through toponymy relating to hunting or trees are considered valuable for
inferring suitability for tree plantation (ibid.: 24), a growing industry in Scotland in the form of carbon sequestration for sale as emissions offsetting.

As well as purely extractive services, the report considers Gaelic toponymy to be useful for recreational and cultural services, among which is the provision of access to “rare and iconic species” – the presence of words like iolaire (eagle) or iasgair, which can mean either (human) fisher or osprey, in areas where the species are no longer found, can provide evidence to inform debates about species reintroductions (ibid.: 30-32). Furthermore, there is a significant strand of suggestion that the landscape’s Gaelic toponymy provides potential significant cultural services to Gaels in the form of self-esteem and a felt connection with the land, with knock-effects for the mental health and wellbeing of Gàidhealtachd-dwellers. The lexical richness of Gaelic poetry in describing features of the natural environment, particularly in those places which are valued for their upland remoteness, is also valued here:

This would provide extra tools in promoting management regimes that seek to defend and enhance biological diversity, and would put a Gaelic slant on the argument for ‘rewilding’, an intellectual standpoint that has, to this point in time, been largely based on anglophone perspectives and which has given little credence to a Gaelic view of Scotland.

(Ibid.: 50)

In these ways Gaelic can be integrated into a modernist biodiversity framework and integrated into discourse of rewilding, often seen as being at odds with the interest of the Gaelic community. The main argument of MacLean’s report is that Gaelic, “largely ignored by authorities and academics concerned with land and marine management has much to offer those who seek to analyse how Scottish ecosystems might, and do, provide services to the population of the country and beyond” (MacLean, 2020: i). It makes this case in a bid to stake the claim of relevance for the Gaelic language, and does so largely with reference to toponymy, and the words for the natural environment found within names. MacIlleathain points out that toponymy influences the perception of the landscape, while the landscape itself has given shape to the Gaelic language. Further, the argument is made that “toponymy
as a knowledge set” is only fully comprehensible in the context of the cultural tradition of song, story and folklore out of which it emerges. In this way, Gaelic vocabulary is constructed as a useful tool for the exploitation of the natural environment, which is a departure from the standard approach which sees toponymy and natural vocabulary as important for the deepening understandings of heritage or for picturesque appreciation of the language, the environment, or both. Here we find a highly unusual operationalisation of vocabulary in a bid to align a minority language with extractivist logic, in a discursive effort to claim relevance of a threatened heritage for the very socioeconomic configurations that marginalise it in the first place.

This connection with the recording of toponymy in the region with economy is of course not new: in tracing the history of cartography of the Gàidhealtachd, Murray remarks that after some years of disinterest in the subject, “mapping recommenced in earnest on Lewis in 1846, for no other reason that that the landowner, Sir James Matheson, wanted an update on the resources of his estate” (2014, 22). It would be unfair to characterise MacIlleathain as in favour of a neoliberalised Gàidhealtachd landscape: the report is highly critical of land management in the region and is aware of the conflicts between dominant conservation regimes and the Gaelic community. However an economistic nature valuation framework seems an unlikely ally for Gaelic revitalisation efforts. Given that “ecosystem services” applies a logic of extractive value to things previously felt to be beyond exploitation, such a framework provides little real promise for Gaelic beyond a recognition of its instrumental utility for the mining of its vocabulary to provide hints of where to look for further profit.

The report offers us a consideration of the work of translation in the production of resources in a number of ways. First, and most obviously it enables the identification of various forms of provisioning or regulating services by translating Gaelic placenames and discussing the ways in which the language’s typically descriptive toponymy might enable the extraction of value from the landscape. Second, it produces the landscape as a repository of cultural services by emphasising the worldviews and histories encoded in placenames. An act of translation renders these legible, but it is also an act of translation in another sense: the translated names, via the ecosystem services model, are translated (borne across) from a descriptive or ethnological appreciation into an economic functionality. Their meanings
are translated into cultural services, enabling them to be conceptualised in terms of monetary value and made commensurable with other goods and services, ecological and otherwise. Third, in doing this, the language itself becomes produced as a kind of natural resource, an untapped seam of value to be extracted as a catalyst for producing and distilling other natural resources.

But what impact does the production of such texts and lexical resources have on Gaelic as it is lived? I met many islanders who felt alienated by the incursion of new words into Gaelic discourse. Older people in particular complained that they could not understand BBC Alba. I found myself in a class with a fluent speaker from Daliburgh who was working as an assistant in a local school, but needed to attend classes to learn the vocabulary of the standardised language, as even basic words were unfamiliar to her. This also emerged in my discussion with a former biodiversity officer at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, who produced the Biodiversity Action Plan for the council in the early 2000s. At the time the council policy was that any document had to be bilingual. As she puts it,

I sit on the fence about that, because I don’t know how many people actually read it in Gaelic. So yes it was great to have it, but obviously it gets very expensive because every document is double the size, and unless you’re doing something in academics, I think your everyday person would probably read the English version. Because lots of native Gaelic speakers can’t read and write Gaelic. Probably the younger generation can, but my generation and people older than me speak very fluently but never learnt to read and write.

This account echoes the lack of uptake for paperwork through Gaelic that I detailed in the previous chapter. There is also a problem of vocabulary. As a native Gaelic speaker from North Uist and an experienced naturalist, she had to find translations for the names of natural features which she knew in English. Species level names differentiating between, for instance, types of gull, would not be known by most people. Words such as “biodiversity” (bith-ionadach, lit.), moreover, are new, and as such the older generation would not be aware of it (of course this is the case among English speakers to a similar extent). “In the end,” she said, “I don’t know who benefits really. Obviously it looks good for the council
doing bilingual documents, but who is it for? I suppose if you’re teaching it’s a great resource but I imagine Joe Bloggs would just read it in English – I probably would as well. Naturally, you go for the easy option, unless you really want to read it in Gaelic.” With a lack of evaluation after the project, it is unclear whether the translated document had any impact, or indeed whether the Biodiversity Action Plan had its desired impact on the natural environment.

In these three texts, then – a biology textbook, a government report, and an action plan – different orientations towards translating biology into Gaelic emerge. In the first case, an effort is made to make biology relevant for Gaelic speakers. In the second, the effort is reversed and Gaelic is made useful to environmental economists. In the third case, it is not clear for whose benefit biology is translated, other than perhaps for optics on the part of the council and its efforts to support Gaelic. In each of them, however, the translation of scientific knowledge into Gaelic or of Gaelic knowledge encoded in placenames into a scientific idiom is a site where forms of linguistic or ecological knowledge become valued in new ways.

**Lexicography in Practice 2: Three Birds**

With my interlocutor’s scepticism about readership in mind, it is questionable what impact texts such as this might have on Gaelic speakers and their lives. Literature of this kind might show us the worldmaking potentials of articulating scientific discourses in Gaelic (for better or worse), and demonstrate broader trends in thinking about what the place of Gaelic might be within scientific modernity: is it a language necessarily destined for use in the nostalgic appreciation of the land, or is it considered worthwhile finding ways to integrate it into the more precise world of biological standardisation? In order to investigate how my interlocutors might answer this question, we move beyond published literature to consider some of the ways in which nature vocabulary circulates in the social texts of Uist.

**Oystercatchers/Trilleachan/Gille-Brìghean/Bridean/Haematopus Ostralegus**

Names of birds, plants, etc. are a window into the lifeworlds of the people who use those names. A good example is the oystercatcher, a common black and white wading bird in Uist.
with bright reddish-orange legs and beak, and a characteristic shrill cry. Below is an abridged exchange on a local Facebook group following a question posted asking for the Gaelic word for oystercatcher, which gives us a much richer picture of island life than the original poster bargained for. The original post reads, “Can anybody give me the correct gaighlig [sic] spelling for Oyster Catcher (bird) please?” In the immediate first comments we see two words emerge: brìdean and trìlleachan. These both come with a number of spellings, illustrating both a lack of standardisation of written Gaelic until recent years, but is also related to the tendency of native Gaelic speakers to have technically imperfect reading and writing skills:

USER 1: We use ‘trìlleachan’ for ‘oyster catcher in Grimsay.
USER 2: see the comment below from USER 4. You don’t need the accent on the ‘i’.
USER 2: Bridean. In North Uist it’s something like Treallachan (check spelling please).
USER 3: gille-brìghde
USER 4: Trilleachan (GOC recommends without grave accent on letter i). Also gille-Bride, gille-bride or gille-Brìghde.
USER 5: Bridean
USER 6: Definitely brìdean in my part of South Uist... Staoinebrig.

In these exchanges, we see people link the word that they use to the specific locations. Staoinebrig (English: Stoneybridge) is a township in the middle district of South Uist, and Grimsay is an island found between Benbecula and North Uist. People argue about spelling, referring to the GOC (Gaelic Orthographic Conventions), which is a recent work of orthographical standardisation produced by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, dictating the authoritatively correct ways of spelling Gaelic words.

The word used for oystercatcher is one of the lexical differences between North and South Uist Gaelic and likely reflects the dominant religious differences between the two regions: the South Uist estate is primarily Catholic, the reformation never quite managing a strong foothold despite the efforts of landlords, while Protestantism of various shades is the
dominant tradition in North Uist. As we have seen, users also offer a number of alternatives to the South Uist word: brìdean being a contraction of the longer Gille-Brìghde, meaning follower of St. Bridget. In Carmina Gadelica, a 19th century collection of Uist songs and folklore, Carmichael has it that “bridein” is the Uist variant, while “gille Bride” is the term used in Lismore (Carmichael 1992, 585). Indeed in Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay, Campbell provides an entry for brìdean, but not gille-brìghdean, suggesting that in Uist at least, the religious origins of the word have been long obscure. The religious explanation was also offered to me in an interview by an English naturalist living in South Uist. He extrapolated on this piece of lore by explaining that the bird’s religious association emerges from the fact that it has a distinctive white cross on its back, visible when its wings are extended. This is not touched upon in the Facebook exchange, but the theory is that the religious connotations of the name of the bird, referring to the veneration of saints within the Catholic faith, would lead to its change in parts of the islands where Protestantism had taken root as the dominant religion.

On the Facebook post, users continue to post their location and the version of the word they use, with some aspects of gentle interisland rivalry bubbling up, for example where one user pokes fun at Benbecula accents (“In Benbecula it's "The Oyster tha Catcher uh") while another joylessly reasserts the correct word and spelling as they see it (“in Benbecula it's known as bridean...”). One user links himself lexically to the bird, saying, “Bridean or Brideanach which I guess you could call me as I come from Kilbride, South Uist.” He offers a further variation of the South Uist word for oystercatcher, Brideanach, and then tells us that we might refer to him using the same word. Many adjectives in Gaelic, and particularly words that denote a person from a particular place commonly end in -ach, e.g. Uibhisteach = person from Uist (Uibhist) or Barrach = person from Barra. As such, someone from Kilbride, or Cille Bhrìghde (lit. Church of Brigid), becomes a Brideanach. This act of wordplay takes the localisation of bird names and refracts it through placenames and names to refer to particular kinds of people. Someone hailing from the Catholic south end of South Uist then becomes through the epithet Brideanach: one who is from Kilbride, one who is oystercatcherish or related to oystercatchers (but specifically in the Catholic connotation), and potentially one who is Brigid-ish or related in some way to St Brigid. To be from Kilbride
is to be connotatively related to the oystercatcher, as well as to the catholic church: in this
animal name, then, the religious, the regional, and the environmental collide.

The last user brings in the well-known and widely considered authoritative dictionary by
Dwelly, and then asserts his own identity (hence validity in the discussion?) as being an
Uibhisteach himself, from Lochboisdale:

USER 18: according to Dwelly, "trilleachan" is the Gaelic for the pied oyster
catcher as well as the sandpiper and grey plover. Is mise Uibhisteach a chaidh a
thogail an Lochbaghasdal. [I am a person from Uist who was raised in
Lochboisdale].

This serves as something of an outlier in the discussion, as a native of South Uist brings to
the table a word associated with North Uist. Although this is not an avowed intention of
Dwelly himself in the compilation of his dictionary, we can see here a standardisation of the
sort desired by later lexicographies explored earlier, as a person from the brìdhean region
advocates the use of a word from elsewhere, utilising not personal experience but
mediating this assertion through lexicographical text: the translation of species in these
texts then can be said to have altered the ways in which the oystercatcher might appear in
language practice. Through this exchange emerging from a question about the correct name
for a bird in Gaelic, we can learn a lot about Uist, and about Gaelic. We see inter-island
rivalries surface in mainly jovial senses, but also religious difference comes to the fore. We
observe the ways in which people police each other’s use of Gaelic – a phenomenon that
many people I spoke to referenced, that there is a tendency for people to nit-pick and fight
over the finer points of the language in ways that discourages less confident users to speak
up. We see the ways in which people’s identities are bound in township-level locality, and
the ways in which this might play out in particular lexical choices. A later exchange
references the flurry of debates emerging from the oystercatcher, in reference to a request
for words to describe the puffin:

USER 1: Think lv opened a can of worms with these bird names.
USER 2: absolutely not, there is no wrong only interesting local words.
USER 1: this happened before in conversation with the oystercatcher.
USER 2: I honestly don't see it like that, there is interesting local history involved with names.
USER 1: I agree with you that’s what I meant regarding the oystercatcher I had heard of drìlleachan, trìlleachan and then I got told about gille-brìghde. Then I can’t remember the story it was a religious story something to do with blood and Christ or maybe it was Saint Bridget. I enjoy the variety and the history.
USER 2: me too! It’s fascinating.

It’s clear that while there’s a “can of worms” hazard in discussions of vocabulary, and that this has the potential for controversy, there is also a sense of joy in the discovery of new words among Gaelic speakers. There’s an appreciation for the diversity of dialect and language which plays out through attempts to describe the biodiversity of the islands. In this way, the tidy standardisation of the species concept struggles to translate across the linguistic border. If Linnaean classification aims at the flattening of environmental lexicon, the production of a common language with which to describe and discuss particular species, then these contemporary texts of vernacular Gaelic lexicography do the opposite: these Gaels delight in the multiplication of terms. A flock of bridein become trilleachan when they travel from one beach in West Kilbride to another in Sollas. This resists a move to a standardised appreciation of biodiversity through the creation of a shared vocabulary and thus a contraction of linguistic diversity. The monoverbalism of species-based taxonomy thus falls apart here where the diversity of dialect meets description of the diversity of nature. On the other hand what we also see here is also the process of linguistic standardisation as users correct each other’s spelling in relation to recent trends in standardised orthography.

**Curracag/Lapwing/Green Plover/Peewit/Whatsit (and Pigeons again)**

There is some academic discussion of the correct naming of certain birds, and disagreements over names can spark friendly debate among Gaelic-speakers, but there is another group where it can produce more acrimonious discourse. This is among the islands’ vibrant community of natural history enthusiasts. One member of this group told me that
there was a major rift between some of the members of the group, those involved in producing annual Bird Reports, some 15 years ago, over the misidentification of a melodious warbler as an icterine warbler. Apparently the disagreement over which name should be applied to a visiting bird reached such a level as to cause the resignation of the county bird recorder and the absence of reports for two years. It is perhaps not surprising that names would be of such social importance in this group if one is familiar with their activities. As natural historians, a core activity consists in naming and classifying the natural world. I attended many events organised by this group, mainly organised by a society named Curraçag (meaning Lapwing). Many of the events centred around how to correctly identify particular species, such as a talk on the bumblebee species of the islands, and they have very active Facebook groups which are dominated by images of various organisms members encounter in the islands followed by discussions of their names.

These people are major upholders of the species concept in the islands. There are two Facebook groups associated with them, which I monitored regularly for the entire time I spent in the islands. Discussions here largely consist of identification. Somebody will post an image, and either provide a species name (often in Latin, but probably just as often English, rarely Gaelic). Within these discussions of the correct name for an encountered being comes a number of motivations for this practice, which went into hyperdrive during the Covid-19 lockdown in the spring and summer of 2020. However as one prominent member explained to me, Linnaean taxonomy is becoming an unreliable tool for natural history documentation. With new DNA-monitoring techniques, the names are changing rapidly, and so increasingly the vernacular name is encouraged within this sphere: “the Latin name might change, but the common whatsit will always be the common whatsit.”

This level of flexibility in the borderlands of species name translation also emerged in my morning of rock dove research. The researchers were aware of the apparent pedantry of their claims about the distinctness of the rock dove. They slipped between calling the birds doves and pigeons, recognising in a sly-humoured way that vernacularly these are pigeons, comedically slipping between the role of scientists who insist on the birds as doves, and laypeople who call them pigeons. At one point, the bird was in the car, in its bag, Michal, is in the car, and Will was on the ground. Michal, finding himself in need of a pencil to jot
down notes, said, “can I have a pencil?” and Will, needing to check something on the rock
dove currently under examination, replied without missing a beat, “can I have a pigeon?”
The comic timing was quick, and the exchange had the feel of a comedy sketch, the word
“pigeon” forming the punchline. At other times I was corrected when I said pigeon with
exaggerated seriousness, or the researchers corrected each other or themselves with mock
exasperation.

This same form of joking once emerged in a conversation with RSPB staff. One member
remarked with feigned annoyance, having pointed out some rock doves as pigeons, how her
colleague insists that we have no pigeons in the outer Hebrides, only rock doves. She says
this in a way to underline that this is pedantic, but with a fondness for this particular form of
pedantry and a grudging acceptance that it is also technically correct. So in both cases, the
use of “pigeon” here is used as a sort of tongue-in-cheek recognition of correctness and
scientific truth versus another way of engaging with the dove through a cultural lens.
Culturally it is a pigeon, professionally it is a rock dove, and for both sets of scientists
(university biologists and practical conservationists), humour around naming becomes a site
through which to negotiate the tensions between their lay and scientific languages and
identities. Here we have acts of translation not between English and Gaelic, but between
two modes of English – scientific and vernacular, the former backed up with the ultimate in
linguistic truthmakers, Latin.

On the instability of species, one member posted thoughtfully under an image of some fungi
that he had struggled to identify down to the exact species level:

I happened to be reading Wordsworth’s prelude and thought this quote pointed to
recent scientific ideas about the boundaries of species being more constructed than
real:

“No officious slave
Art thou of that false secondary power
By which we multiply distinctions, then
Deem that our puny boundaries are things
That we perceive, and not that we have made.
To thee, unblinded by these formal arts,
The unity of all hath been revealed,...”

This comes from the *Prelude*, which is an autobiographical poem in which Wordsworth examines his own vocation to poetry. Immediately preceding these quoted lines is an assertion that science, above referred to as “that false secondary power by which we multiply distinctions,” is not a “glory” or a “boast”, but a “succedaneum, and a prop to our infirmity”. As he goes on to point out, above, scientific classifications of the world such as species taxonomy are socially constructed, in an anticipation of late twentieth century STS work. And so, in the face of recent scientific developments, and poetic reflection, the group are confronted with the limitations of the species concept, but yet persist in their taxonomic work. Why? The obvious answer is that, limitations aside, the species concept still remains that most useful way to build datasets in a way that might be used by the broader scientific community, even if it has its inaccuracies. But there is more to it than that. One post describes the variety of species found in a moth trap, and I think illustrates the motivations behind the classification of Uist’s wildlife:

Had the moth trap out last night, didn’t catch much but there was a big grey cranefly flitting about inside.Normally at this time of year its likely to be *Tipula oleracea* but this seemed slightly different. It had a diagonal white flash on the wings and a dark genital capsule with a tuft of golden hairs underneath. It keys out as *Tipula luna* which isn’t recorded on NBN for the Outer Hebrides and doesn’t feature on the OHBR Diptera Checklist either. So I didn’t catch many moths last night but I did find what looks like a new species for the Outer Hebrides, and there were also two species of Caddisfly, (*Limnephilus affinis* and *L.elegans*) and a Common Earwig (*Forficula auricularia*) and lots of tiny black flies I haven't worked out how to identify yet.

This post gives us a narrative of the encounter held between the poster and the various creatures he had captured. The naming of things is a part of the marking of expected seasonal patterns, as *Tipula oleracea* is the anticipated find. However, on closer inspection,
carried out due to this particular recorder’s meticulous approach to the correct naming of insects, it turns out to be a new species for the islands, which is discovered by cross-referencing it with the National Biodiversity Network database, itself a list of named creatures with geographical and temporal stamps to denote the circumstances of their encounter with humans. There is a final touch admitting the limitations of the user’s ability to name the “tiny black flies”, with the crucial addition of “yet”, indicating an intention to fix this. This post exemplifies a number of the motivations behind this naming practice: the first is the joy of discovery, felt in the personal tone of the text, the sense of curiosity and encounter. What this post (and countless others like it) gives us is a story about an encounter between naturalist and insect, refracted through taxonomic documentation. Second is the engagement with databases and lists of species names, both at local and national level (OHBR: Outer Hebrides Biological Recording). My many conversations with members of this group tell me that this database-making is tied up with a conservationist ethic of producing a baseline of known biodiversity, either to enable preservation, or failing that, an understanding of what has been lost. The classification of creatures in one’s moth trap becomes a way of knowing more deeply what types of creatures one lives alongside, and is a form of care for something that may soon disappear. Furthermore, engaging other local residents in taxonomic documentation is considered an important goal of the group in order to drive responsible environmental behaviour through enhancing certain forms of knowledge of local biodiversity: closeness breeds responsibility.

However, if the categorisation of nature is born from a desire to care for an endangered form of life, does this concern extend to the endangered linguistic heritage of the islands, or how does it relate to that? For the islands’ resident taxonomists, Gaelic maintains a relatively marginal position. Having noticed that their many pamphlets and publications have very little or no mention of Gaelic, and that very few of the so-called “locals”, i.e. those who grew up in the islands, were ever in attendance at meetings of these organisations, I asked a member about this. There is a willingness to engage with Gaelic in biological recording, but as I was told, it remains hampered by pragmatic concerns. Firstly, as I had noticed, there is very little overlap between the Gaelic speaking community and the nature recording community. As such there is a lack of the necessary human resources to manage bilingual recording effectively, and if the wrong name is used the organisation might find
itself in “hot water”. She is well aware that this is a “delicate subject”, and as an incomer, aims to be “sensitive about where [she puts] her big feet”. Secondly, one of the main outputs of this group is a series of pamphlets – double-sided, glossy A4 folded sheets detailing the islands’ biodiversity. If these were to be bilingual, there would not be enough space to convey the necessary information. She was quick to emphasise that she understands the ways in which nature and the environment are “part of the culture” but the organisation was currently lacking “a way to introduce it to make it useful”. As the organisation sees itself as having no political role, there is no mandate or willingness to get involved in discussions relating to the interconnections between Gaelic, land, crofting, and conservation. In this conversation we find a familiar theme: the question of the usefulness of Gaelic in the context of naming.

Gaelic is present in the organisation in at least one major way: the name of the society is the Gaelic word for lapwing or green plover, which, like the trilleachan (oystercatchers) of North Uist, apparently gained their Gaelic name (curracag) onomatopoeically, as I was told by a woman from South Uist. Dwelly tells us that the curracag is so named for the tuft of feathers on its head, which resemble a woman’s head-dress (currac). In Dwelly, the curracag might also refer to a corn stook (a bundle of cut stalks or sheaves), or the “tufted dun bird, pochard, fuligula cristata” – the Latin name given by Dwelly actually refers to the tufted duck. The word curracag, then, carries on stories about customary dress, but also about the characteristics of the crofting land which forms its habitat (if we take curracag to refer to the lapwing). The distinctive crest on the head of the lapwing references the shape of the corn stook, a traditional method of drying crops for winter feed, now outmoded by silage baling and made more difficult by changes in seasonal weather patterns which make outdoor drying a riskier business. The adoption of the Curracag as the society’s totem does much, then: it highlights, in its Gaelicness, the ironic absence of Gaelic in the society’s goings-on, but it also foregrounds the interconnectedness of the islands’ biodiversity and its natural-cultural heritage.
Sea Eagle/White-Tailed Eagle/Iolaire Mhara/Iolaire Sùil-na-Grène/Iolaire na Sùile Grène/Haliaaetus Albicilla

One other animal species which speaks to many of the tensions in the literature on Gaelic nature lexicography is the white-tailed or sea eagle. This is a highly controversial species in the islands, having been reintroduced to Rum, one of the Small Isles, found between the Uist and the mainland, several decades ago. A species found on the Red List of the Birds of Conservation Concern, and the largest bird of prey native to the UK, the sea eagle has now re-established itself and then spread from Rum to the Western Isles. The controversy surrounds disagreement over the extent to which the birds predate on sheep. Crofters insist that they lose lambs to the eagles, and I am also aware of at least one person who has had a small dog taken by one. Within the conservation community, there is a variation in the level of acceptance of this fact: some baldly refuse to accept it, citing a lack of evidence, and in some cases implying that many crofters are negligent in their animal practices anyway. Others sit on the fence, or tentatively admit that it is a likely occurrence.

Controversy notwithstanding, vocabulary surrounding the eagles is, as I have mentioned, an exemplar of some lexical tensions. In one of the first Gaelic classes I took after moving to the islands, one of my classmates asked our teacher, a local woman hailing from the north end of South Uist, what the word for sea eagle was. She replied that she had no idea, because when she was growing up, there were no sea eagles. Since she grew up during a time period following the disappearance of the eagles from the islands and before their reintroduction, she had never learnt a word to describe a bird that was not present. This was a fairly common occurrence in class for species which were not native to the islands, or had lacked a use value and so were not discussed commonly.

This lack of commonly used vocabulary posed a problem for the RSPB when producing signage on the Loch Druidibeg “community nature reserve”, a location where sea eagles are commonly spotted. The RSPB’s policy is that any signage in the islands must be bilingual, but as the eagle itself had been reintroduced, the production of signage about the eagle also required the reintroduction of vocabulary to describe it. I spoke to a member of RSPB staff about this, and she told me that they were keen to find a word that had been used in South
Uist, because “standardisation flattens out the quirks” of the language, and they had worked with Ceòlas (a local Gaelic cultural organisation) in order to find something with local character. Since Loch Druidibeg is a community reserve, and shares space with working crofting commons, it was important to the team that a Gaelic-speaking crofter could read the sign and recognise a “word he used as a child”. Of course, as my Gaelic teacher demonstrated, it is unlikely that there are many (if any) living Gaels with any childhood word for the sea eagle. She also admitted that the choice of Gaelic word was chosen with some consideration for the linguistic aesthetics: “iolaire sùil na grèine”, the chosen term, translates literally as eagle of the eye of the sun. It is worth examining the signage found on-site in slightly pedantic detail here: for the most part, the bilingual text is as close to a direct translation as the contours of Gaelic and English expression allow. There is however one sentence with a key deviation – that which mentions the eagle:

Gaelic Text: ‘S dòcha gum faic thu iolaire sùil na grèine (no iolaire-mhara), agus gum faigh thu lorg air na freumhan agad ann am feartan fìor inntinneach an dreach-tire àrsaidh seo [you might see the eagle of the eye of the sun (or sea eagle) and find your roots in the fascinating features of this ancient landscape]

English Text: Look out for the iolaire na sùile grèine – the eagle with the sunlit eye, and find your roots in the fascinating features of this ancient landscape.

Two things are worth mentioning here, both related to vocabulary: the divergence in the Gaelic spelling, and the presence or absence of alternative vocabulary. On the former point, the Gaelic text’s “iolaire sùil na grèine” conflicts with the English text’s “iolaire na sùile grèine”. Grammatically, the second version that appears for the English reader is incorrect. It is surprising that it appears incorrectly in a sign with bilingual text, providing the correct version mere inches away. This suggests to me that the accuracy of this piece of vocabulary is not relevant here, but rather its aesthetic value is the important thing: an approximate Gaelic spelling serves its purpose to provide a basis for the poetic and picturesque “eagle with the sunlit eye”. Furthermore, the Gaelic text provides “iolaire-mhara” (literally eagle of

16 My translation.
the sea) as an alternative word for the eagle. What this implies is one of two things: first, that the signage is charitably seeking to reintroduce a diverse natural vocabulary by providing alternative words for describing the reintroduced animal to which it refers. The second option is that “iolaire sùil na grèine” is not comprehensible to a Gaelic speaker, necessitating its interpretation in prosaic terms as “iolaire-mhara”, in the absence of a remembered word from an imagined crofting childhood.

The choice of vocabulary, then, can be seen to reflect an attitude seen in some of the earlier Gaelic vocabularies of nature, for example Forbes, who see the value of the enterprise of describing the natural world using Gaelic in primarily aesthetic terms. As my RSPB interlocutor admitted somewhat sheepishly, the eagle with the sunlit eye was indeed an aesthetic choice. The Gaelic language makes its appearance in this natural historical context in this way less as a tool for the accurate description of the world and more as a tool for picturesque appreciation, as well as being an object of picturesque appreciation itself, without concern for its accurate deployment in terms of its own grammar. As such the eagle not only threatens certain aspects of Gaelic culture in its alleged preying upon lambs and the impact of this on crofting, but also makes a certain discursive point in the deployment of its lexicography: that Gaelic is a language for appreciating but not defining. Much like the adoption of the Curracag as the totem of the natural history society which does not incorporate Gaelic into its workings, the naming of the eagle on this sign tells us much about the aesthetic role of Gaelic within nature conservation.

Conclusion

The naming of biodiversity in different languages produces different effects in the world. Demonstrating the presence of particular Linnaean taxa through the practice of naming can be used as evidence for conservation. In this way the rock dove might continue to exist as a genetically distinct population, but only if it can be named as such through Latin classification systems. Encouraging people to go out and name the species they see around them in English and Latin is seen a core way to engage them with the natural environment around them and thus promote responsible behaviours. Through these processes, naming and classification in these languages produce the world around them. Failing that,
biodiversity documentation can provide baselines to establish what, in the future, will have been lost. Contemporary taxonomy and genetics complicates simplistic Linnaean classification, leading to some “namers” preferring colloquial English taxonomy. As we have seen, the use of Latin binomial taxonomy does not create a closed worldview, and does not necessarily represent a cold, colonial view of the natural world. For those involved in taxonomy, there are also slippages and tensions between these different modes of naming, and the naming of creatures is a storied practice that encodes an encounter, an effort to know better.

Naming species in Gaelic contributes to efforts at language revitalisation. Interest in local variations of the names of individual species of birds provides a space for lively discussions among Gaelic speakers and learners. Through these discussions, the speech community comes together and reforges itself, with different members connecting with each other over their mutual interest in the usage of words and the maintenance of linguistic diversity. If the vitality of a language can be measured by the number of contexts in which it might be used (Lamb 2008), then the use of Gaelic to express information in a scientific register would provide evidence of its future viability. As such, production of materials such as biology textbooks and Biodiversity Action Plans might take on a political register. The production of such texts might be said to have a performative aspect in that they seek to effect a change on the language and its fate via the mere act of stating particular kinds of information in that language. Once these texts are brought into existence and the species concept is translated into Gaelic (seòrsa, according to MacLeòid and MacThomàis 1972; a common word meaning sort or type), the number of registers in which Gaelic might be used is expanded. However as recognised by my interlocutor who was involved in the Biodiversity Action Plan, technical Gaelic names at species level become specialised to the point of functional incomprehensibility. Furthermore, the standardising ethic of lexicographical work risks the loss of diverse vocabulary while enabling the expansion of the language’s available registers of expression. As discussed in the previous chapter, then, the incorporation of Gaelic within these forms of inscriptions may find itself at odds with many Gaelic speakers and their experience with their own language.
In terms laid out by Ingold, the translation of scientific concepts into the language enables the Gaelic language as noun to language as verb in new epistemological and ontological spheres. However, as Sharon Macdonald pointed out with the colour of grass, does this bending of the language around one version of the world preclude others? Furthermore, are efforts to construct Gaelic as a language of science mutually valued? The imprecision of the RSPB’s Gaelic signage at Loch Druidibeg might imply that it is not: Gaelic might be valued as a tool of ecological outreach, or ecological outreach might offer itself as content for the proliferation of Gaelic text in the public sphere, but either way the precision of language takes a backseat to its aesthetic value.

Overall, when we consider the three languages of naming, what can we draw from the discussion? We might say that Latin has a tendency primarily to language in precise terms, and has a traditional epistemological primacy that is beginning to lose currency among namers because of the increasing divorce between vernacularly observed reality and the growing abstraction of Linnaean taxonomy’s criteria of truth, in the context of increased use of genomic sequencing in species delineation. Furthermore its storiedness as a mode of languaging animal lifeways is not entirely confined to the objectifying modes of thinking that attract critique from scholars of science and technology: its proponents allow slippage of register and express their love for the natural world through taxonomy, meaning that a characterisation of Latin taxonomy as one-dimensionally colonial and capitalist in its worldmaking outlook is overly simplistic. A similar story might be told with English nature naming in Uist – there is a tendency towards the homogenisation of worldviews in its nature texts, but in practice there is room for inconsistency, play, multiplicity: a pigeon is a rock dove is a wolf is a pigeon. Gaelic, by contrast, meets in English and Latin in the middle, coming from the other extreme: the dominant mode of Gaelic as a language of nature is one of playfulness and inconsistency, but in texts it sometimes finds a space to integrate itself with an objectifying worldmaking project.

Does the naming of natural phenomena in Gaelic have an impact on the phenomena themselves? We could argue that to name an oystercatcher in diverse ways impacts upon the appreciation of those diverse ways of naming and thus has an impact on the survival of that linguistic diversity. However, can we say that the diverse naming of oystercatchers in
Gaelic might have impacts on the birds themselves in the same way that their invocation in Latin and English produces the kinds of texts that can impact on their conservation? Texts such as MacLean’s ecosystem services and Gaelic report might show one way in which the circulation of Gaelic names might be integrated into a capitalist worldbuilding project whereby nature and Gaelic co-constitute each other’s economic value and become translated into resources through the scientific register. Thus the naming of a bird in Gaelic produces particular effects in the world, beyond the idea that it impacts on the modes of the language itself.

Drawing on the previous chapter which detailed writing as a linguistic mode of making and interacting with the world, this chapter has added two other linguistic worldmaking practices to the understanding of how the islands are written into being: translating and naming. Each of these have been shown, in their own way, as ways in which the minority Gaelic language culture interacts with dominant Anglophone “linguistic market” (Bourdieu 1999) and its ways of classifying and understanding the world, as well as being means through which certain writers have tried to make a case for the place of Gaelic within that homogenising linguistic market. Nonetheless, this is not without risk, for by translating Anglophone classification into Gaelic or vice versa the classifications themselves, the things classified and the destination language may find themselves altered in unexpected ways. In the next chapter, we examine another form of taxonomy – or as Helmreich (2005) puts it, metataxonomy – in a consideration of invasion biology and ideas about indigeneity. Then Chapter Six I will add a further linguistic practice – predicting – to the mix along with translating, in which we will see, among other textual processes, the translation of climate modelling into Gaelic, and the translation of Gaelic into the language of statistical modelling, both in service of producing visions of the future which are not simple representations, but rather intended to do specific work.
Introduction: “You’re non-native and invasive!”

“The SNH can’t be talked to because they know they’re right, and you are wrong. They came in and they tried to eradicate the rhododendron without any consultation whatsoever with the local people. I love the flowers, so I went and I asked them why they were doing this. He said to me, ‘well they’re non-native and invasive.’ So I said to him, ‘You’re non-native and invasive.’”

When I hear this story, I’m sitting with Mairi in a hotel restaurant on North Uist. Over bowls of soup she’s been telling me about her life, born and raised in Benbecula, now living in the
mainland. We have been for a walk around Pobull Fhinn, a stone circle which is beside the hotel, a particularly beautiful spot in the islands which provides a strangely literal backdrop for a wistful conversation about lost Celtic cultures. The name Pobull Fhinn means “Finn’s People,” referring to the mythical warrior Finn, a key figure in the mythology of the Gaelic world, so the location carries a powerful resonance in imaginaries of a proud Celtic past. The conversation has turned many times to Mairi’s relationship with Gaelic and Gaeldom – she speaks passionately about this subject, being a native, fluent speaker herself. She makes many comparisons between the Gaels and Indigenous peoples, using the Canadian terminology of First Nations. This is not the first or the last time I heard a Gael compare their experience with that of Indigenous peoples, or even refer to themselves outright as Indigenous. As might be expected, for many the framework of Indigeneity provides a narrative structure for the loss of knowledge and cultural practices over centuries of repressive governance of the Gàidhealtachd. Perhaps less obviously, it also structures her understanding of the management of the natural environment.

The rhododendron is a highly invasive non-native shrub, introduced to Britain in 1763 (Cross 1975) as an ornamental plant and now the subject of widespread and somewhat Sisyphean efforts at eradication, colloquially termed “rhody-bashing”. It became popular due to its self-seeding capacity, making it ideal on estates for providing game cover, as well as attractive flowers (Despard and Gallagher, 2018). It is likely that the naturalised population is of Iberian origin, but significantly interbred with other cultivated varietals native to North America since introduction, potentially increasing tolerance for colder conditions (Milne and Abbot, 2000). In fact it is now struggling in its native range in Spain, where it is now of conservation concern – changing climate in both Spain and the UK is potentially behind its status as “of concern” and invasive respectively (Maclean et al., 2019). This intercontinental hybridisation mixed with changing climate make the invasive naturalised British population of rhododendron a true native of the Anthropocene. Lady Cathcart, one of the great villainous landowners in the folk history of the South Uist Estate, is widely credited with having introduced rhododendron to the islands. Aside from the beauty of the rhododendron flowers, Mairi argues that the plants should be allowed to remain as a landscape-level monument to the repressive landlords of the past. She likens this idea to the question of statues of slave traders, as debates rage across the United Kingdom about the
memorialisation of Britain’s colonial past and such monuments are being torn down elsewhere by protestors, while petitions proliferate elsewhere for the lawful removal of others. Thus for Mairi the rhododendron’s presence, as well as its eradication, are inextricably linked with forms of external government and with colonialism. She argued that the non-native invasive plant is a living memorial to the excesses of the landed gentry who attempted to shape the landscape according to their whims and left lasting ecological damage in their wake. Its eradication, without consultation or space for debate, is seen as evidence of perceived overstepping of boundaries by government agencies and NGOs, who ignore the concerns of locals and are themselves seen as “non-native and invasive”.

Due to the relatively slow spreading nature of the rhododendron, Gallagher and Despard (2018) suggest that it is better characterised as “neglected” than “invasive” – this due to the fact of general neglect and disrepair of Highland and Island estates following WWII, and the fact that it takes many years for a new rhododendron to flower and seed. Thus to call the rhododendron invasive highlights its relations with landscape but obscures those with humans. “The failure to see, and tendency to undervalue, the work of producing landscape is a condition of invasiveness in a variety of settings” (ibid.: 390). This can be compared to historical analysis of the mink invasion which conclude that mink were “allowed to become established” in the mid- to late twentieth century despite the fact that its eradication was “universally sought” across all sectors (Sheail, 2014: 220). Critiques of invasive species control tell us that eradication campaigns are problematic in that they “natural[ise] the idea that invasiveness is a property of specific plants, rather than an emergent quality or historical event arising from the interaction of numerous agents and circumstances” (Despard and Gallagher, 2018) – that is, they erase the social and historical conditions of the introduction.

This critique is salient in thinking through invasive species in Uist. An island landscape that contains rhododendron subverts the potential to describe it convincingly as “wilderness” – the presence of an invasive alien plant with historical ties to the land-owning class of the time of the clearances makes it clear that something in this landscape is not how it “ought” to be. The same goes with the deer as a potent symbol of Scottish wilderness and its ties to the upper-class pursuit of hunting, but also a threat to the nascent repopulated “native”
woodland of the islands. Wilderness aesthetics and management can be thought of as a
continuation of violent processes of land dispossession in the islands (Cf Hunter, 2014;
Cronon, 2002). The entire landscape of the islands is, in many ways, a monument to the
degradation wrought by large scale sheep farming, but the barren-looking heathland has
been naturalised within the aesthetics of Scottish wilderness Romanticism. Meanwhile the
bright pink flowers of the rhododendron in the middle of a sea of heather does something
to disrupt this aesthetic. A landscape without rhododendron, then, facilitates its perception
as “wild” and untouched by human activity, while a landscape with rhododendron, to those
familiar with the plant, foregrounds the place as actively depopulated rather than
unpopulated. This is what we’re doing the day we pick rhododendrons and redistribute
“native” trees. We protect what is designated as native wildlife from invasive remnants of
former land distribution regimes, but in so doing we erase living monuments to those very
regimes. Mink, even, perhaps tell us something about shifting economic patterns and failed
rural development opportunities as tastes for particular luxury items, i.e. fur, shift in the
metropolitan centres.

Like the roots of the rhododendron, which are notoriously difficult to unearth, the
relationship between islanders and notions of indigeneity is complex and at times
intractable. It is one that is gaining currency in debates that rage over the future of the
Gaelic language, in debates between two rival camps: those who cede primacy to ethnic
Gaeldom and an identity born of heritage and birthright, versus those who proffer a civil
Gaeldom where speaking the language is a sufficient identity marker of the modern Gael.
While the debate largely takes place between those at the poles of this spectrum, it should
be emphasised that most, if not nearly all of the people I spoke to, fall somewhere in
between. The former refers to a position in which Gaelic belongs properly to those who are
ethnic Gaels, that is with ancestry in the Gàidhealtachd and an embeddedness in native-
speaking communities. For those who hold this position, the language and the land are
inextricably tied to each other, and the only future for the language is one that is based in
traditional livelihoods and communities. The latter, civic approach, emphasises inclusivity,
non-native speaking learners, and an approach to Gaelic embedded as much throughout
Scotland as in the traditional Gàidhealtachd region. It is the connection between the land,
the geography of the islands, the people who belong to this geography and the language(s)
they speak, where we find the bridge between invasions and indigeneity, between rhododendron and the English language – each of these things is for some an alien invasion that threatens the fragile balance of the islands. If Gaelic is only truly authentic within the natural landscapes of the Gàidhealtachd, and the character of this natural landscape is itself inextricable from the language and associated naturecultural practices, then an increase in monoglot English speakers challenges both this version of Gaelic as a community language and the multispecies communities that are a part of that system. Likewise, invasive species threaten the integrity and character of the landscapes that give rise to the language.

Ecologists working on invasiveness are aware of the role that language might play in managing and resolving conflicts over invasive species control. A study based on quantitative content analysis of media reports and stakeholder documents surrounding the Uist hedgehog management controversy (discussed below) demonstrates an awareness in the field that the language used by stakeholders can help to understand a conflict and suggest courses of action to resolve such conflicts (Webb and Rafaelli, 2008). Selge and Fischer’s (2011) study on social representations found that often a metaphor of social relations was used to understand invasive species dynamics, for instance the image of a small village upset by the arrival of an unruly new resident (ibid.: 304). This study used a framework of “anchoring” drawn from cognitive linguistics to understand how old concepts are used to understand and make sense of new ones, and how social representations emerge. Thus the “target domain” (the thing to be understood) was invasion biology, and the “source domain” (the existing cognitive framework) was “a phenomenon of human social life” (ibid). The import of this study is that the ways in which an issue is presented to the public will be of vital importance because it “influences the choice of source domains” and therefore “the conclusions drawn” from metaphorical engagement with that source domain (ibid.: 309). As I will show, there is considerable crossover in the language used to discuss indigeneity as a social concept and biological invasiveness – at various points each can provide “source domain” for metaphors in discussions of the other.

This chapter attempts to grapple with some of these thorny issues. At the centre of debates around ecological invasiveness and cultural indigeneity is the question: who and what belongs, or does not belong, in Uist? Who gets to decide where these boundaries are
drawn? What does a rhododendron have to do with a holiday home? What light can invasive species discourses throw on discourses of Gaelic indigeneity, and vice versa? We look here to the ambivalent relationship between the islands and Scotland, and the UK more broadly – both in terms of cultural and ecological continuity. Discourses of indigeneity and invasion share a common perception that the unique resources of the islands (its biodiversity and Gaelic culture) find themselves threatened by external enemies. Both discourses hold that there is a fundamental system imbalance which impacts the ability of vulnerable locals (both human and nonhuman) to thrive in their native habitats by artificially introducing competitors or predators from elsewhere. In the case of the ecological system, the external pressures come in the form of non-native invasive species, which have been introduced by human interference in the natural world: people transported organisms into ecosystems where they do not belong, and this threatens the unique native quality of island ecologies. But what, then, is the system imbalance threatening Gaelic? In the face of the growing housing crisis and its relationship with Gaelic language decline, many Gaelic speaking islanders are finding indigeneity a helpful framework for articulating resistance to the political economy of language shift.

In pursuing this enquiry, I first turn my attention to invasion biology, tracing the contours of non-native species control in Scotland, drawing on critiques from the social sciences and humanities and offering contributions to this critique from my own fieldwork. I then put anthropological debates about indigeneity into conversation with the growing national and local currency of indigeneity as a framework for understanding the Gaelic world. Finally I bridge these two discourses of belonging and examine what light they shed on each other and the worlds they aim to construct. I base my account on conversations with participants on notions of indigeneity, time spent with conservation professionals in their efforts to eradicate American mink, hedgehogs, rhododendron, and gunnera, and a variety of documentary sources from policy, social media, and public debate. Specifically, I argue that these two discourses of belonging make visible contested ideas about Britishness and islanders’ relationships to it. To what extent do the Western Isles belong to a wider cultural and environmental configuration known as Scotland or the United Kingdom and to what extent are claims of their distinctiveness from these constructions valid and valued?
Invasion Biology and its Critiques

Before delving into the specifics of Uist, it is worth discussing social scientific approaches to the study of non-native invasive species and their management. Non-native invasive species, conceived in the aftermath of colonial biological exchange as “a diaspora of nature” are a key feature of the Anthropocene (Frawley and MacCalman, 2014: 4). In many cases introduced species thrive in ecological conditions altered by climate change, outcompeting their native counterparts (Winfield et al. 2011), thus compounding the Anthropocenic resonances of the issue. Indeed, a running joke when I was accompanying a conservation worker on the hunt for gunnera, an invasive South American plant, was the frequency of what we came to call “Anthropocene moments” – we tracked down a large colony of gunnera at the dump in Benbecula, located in a narrow channel in between massive bales of old tyres and the walls of what used to be a quarry – so in the spaces created between an abandoned extractive project and the excesses of automotive waste, an invasive alien plant was able to thrive. We hacked down the plants, painted the stumps with glyphosate (itself a controversial herbicide), and then covered the painted stumps over with the leaves to prevent rain washing the chemical off before it had seeped into the roots. In another “Anthropocene moment” we used pieces of rubbish to weigh down the leaves since it was a windy day, with a storm on the way. There are myriad ironies and contradictions in this kind of work: the use of toxic chemicals to protect the environment, the survival of new forms of life in “capitalist ruins” (cf Tsing 2015), the usefulness of discarded rubbish to protect our work against an extreme weather event.

But what is a “non-native invasive species?” the Scottish Invasive Species initiative defines it as: “any non-native animal or plant that has the ability to spread causing damage to the environment, the economy, our health or the way we live.” Native species “are generally taken to be those that were present in Britain at the end of the last ice age, which got to Britain under their own steam when there was still a connection (a land bridge) to the European mainland” (Scottish Invasive Species Initiative n.d.). The Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) adopts a similar outlook, stressing negative economic and health outcomes as potential cause for designation as “invasive,” but also pointing out that some “are native to some parts of the UK but not to other parts (for example native to the
mainland but not all islands)” – this will be a key point when examining the controversies around invasion biology in Uist (SEPA, n.d.). Non-native invasive species are estimated to have cost the UK economy between £5.4bn and £13.7bn since 1976 (Cuthbert et al. 2021: 299). They are considered widely to be one of the major threats to global biodiversity (Bremner and Park, 2007: 306). It is commonly understood that eradication of such species is necessary for conservation but also on welfare grounds, out of “compassion for all of the ecosystem, its species, the individuals being protected, and the invasive animals themselves” (Russell et al., 2015: 670).

The term “non-native invasive species” has attracted significant criticism for its lack of clarity and precision (Selge et al., 2011). While origins external to the ecosystem is a universal condition of the definition, it is usually associated with the ability to spread and cause harm to native ecosystems (e.g. Winfield et al., 2009), often (but not always) associated specifically with human agency or introduction (e.g. (Fraser et al., 2014: 605), and sometimes social and economic impacts are considered core to the definition (e.g. Cuthbert et al., 2021: 302). Sagoff has argued that there is no empirical evidence for the supposed four consensus facts of invasion biology: the economic cost of invasive species, the idea that all invasive species pose extinction threats, the idea that there are clear biological (ahistorical) differences between native and invasive species, systems and processes, and the ontological dualism between human and natural forces which characterise most definitions (2019). As such, invasion biology is a contested and diverse field of study and practice. Some voices within the invasion biology conversation have called for an abandonment of the framework of non-nativeness altogether, focusing instead on whether a species causes harm to “biodiversity, human health, ecological services and economies”. This still controversial view suggests a “permeation of critique from social scientific disciplines and society at large regarding the morality, logic and utility of using nativeness as a guiding principle in nature conservation and restoration management” (Van der Wal et al., 2015: 349).

Such social science work on invasive species eradication enables us to look at how nonhuman species are variously co-opted into different projects and conceptualised in ways that shape and are shaped by human interactions with the nonhuman environment (see
Wanderer, 2020). An analysis of the field of invasion biology tells us that it is “not the taxon that is alien but the human” – that is what defines a species as invasive is the involvement of human in its introduction outside its normal range (Sagoff, 2019). The classification of alienness and invasiveness is a metataxonomy, that is a classificatory logic moving beyond Linnaean nomenclature and organising itself around a rubric of natural or cultural agency (Helmreich, 2005). The taxonomies imposed on different species in relation to the ecosystem have important effects for the lives of humans, these and other animals. For instance, while biodiversity – a term that is central to narratives of sustainability - appears to be “an inclusive approach to conservation,” designation as “invasive” or “native” is vital for the tolerance or exclusion of a certain species, and this divide is “premised on the reification of a specific historical moment that ignores the changing and dynamic nature of ecologies” – thus a xenophobic state of stable “homeostasis” is favoured over “a recognition of ongoing change,” and crucially for many, including Van Dooren, whether a species is deemed “native” often has more to do with belonging in a particular historical moment in time than belonging in a particular place. This ideal is used as a justification and legitimization of regimes of killing as moral imperative or protection of other species’ interests (Van Dooren, 2011). These designations as “native” or “invasive” or “alien” have effects on animal bodies, but are also tied to human hierarchies, as certain invasions may not be classed as such depending on who is threatened and whether it might be in the interests of legitimate authority (Robbins, 2004). As such there are a number of interlocking physical and performative practices that produce particular natural worlds and have real impacts on the bodies of the humans and animals caught in these worldmaking projects.

Much of the anthropological literature on invasives examines the relationships between plant or animal species branded as non-native and invasive and the movement of people in a colonised world, and thus the discourse of invasion biology becomes an entry point into the ways human migration and belonging is understood. For example, Subramaniam (2001) makes the point that invasive species discourses have everything to do with racialised language and xenophobic rhetoric in a globalised world. She points out the ways in which the language and tropes used to describe demonised migrant groups (otherness, excessive fecundity, sneakiness, etc.) are the same as those used to describe non-native invasive plants. The argument is that this tendency belongs to a cultural moment “which displaces
anxieties about economic, social, political and cultural changes onto outsiders and foreigners” (2001: 34). The problem with this is that it displaces focus from the degradation of habitats by focusing on “foreign invaders” as the sole or main problem.

A major subset of this literature specifically studies the relationship between nativeness/indigeneity in people and organisms in settler colonial societies. Helmreich points out in Hawai‘i that not all introductions are considered as such. Staples introduced in around 400CE by the first settlers of Hawai‘i are generally associated with the people who introduced them and thus designated ‘native’. If invasiveness versus nativeness is generally understood as a difference between human and natural agency in introduction, then introduced plants and animals may still be categorised as “native”, implying that Native Hawaiians are included within the category of nature (Helmreich, 2005). Elsewhere, anthropologists have looked at introduced species in ways that have complicated dominant discourses of indigenous peoples’ close connection with native nonhuman species. Rather, aboriginal Australians demonstrate (perhaps unsurprisingly) a flexibility in constructions of “what belongs” and indeed, it is argued, indigenous identity is “commensurate with an embracing of introduced ecological forms” – thus indigeneity is in no way connected with a rejection of introduced biological forms (Trigger, 2008: 641).

Looking at the role played by invasive plants in exacerbating wildfires in South Africa, the Comaroffs also ask whether, in the face of eroding national borders under globalised capitalism, nature and the nativeness of plants have become a “persuasive alibi for the conception of nationhood and its frontiers?” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001: 631). Likewise, with the plurality of identities in the postcolonial society, they argue, a privileging of autochthony and the native have become a solution to the contradictions of the contemporary state – what emerges is a “bizarre drama in which flora signify what politics struggles to name” (2001: 646), that is the ability to “construct a nation with reference to a rhetoric of exclusion, a rhetoric validated by appeal to the apparent value-free exigencies of botany and the environmental sciences” (2011: 650) in the face of liberalisation and deregulation. This literature tends to conceive of invasive species taxonomy in Britain as being relatively straightforward compared to places with more obvious colonial legacies such as Australia: invasives are considered as anything not present prior to the last ice age,
and the social discourses around invasiveness are uncomplicatedly mappable onto “exclusionary nationalisms,” while Australia and places like it are “particularly vexed” by slippages between political indigeneity and natural belonging (Martin and Trigger, 2015: 276-277).

Looking at discourses of indigeneity in the Western Isles complicates this tidy distinction between colonies with complex relationships to indigeneity and European centres of empire with more straightforward ones. Prior work on invasion biology focuses largely on racialised xenophobia in the context of white-dominated immigration politics or straightforward settler-colonial contexts. This is not to say that there are not people of colour in the islands and that they do not experience racism. However the dominant forms of anxiety around outside invasion are different here. The perceived invaders here are predominantly white and in possession of considerably greater economic, social and cultural capital than are the “Indigenous” islanders, who are themselves also mostly white. Indeed, historically speaking, the kinds of anti-immigrant/anti-alien-species rhetoric detailed by Subramaniam have been levelled against the islanders themselves, not against incomers to the islands – in the days of the Highland Clearances and the Congested Districts Board, islanders were commonly conceived as overly populous and fecund, or as unwanted pests on the land that could be more profitably utilised. I find this body of work an instructive starting point for the discussion, making available to us a conceptual link between invasive species control and questions about who and what belongs in the nation state, and what the relationship might be between the islands and the nation at large (whether that be Scotland or the United Kingdom).

**Invasion Biology in Uist: Native and Nation**

In this section, I examine invasion biology in Scotland as a whole and Uist in particular to explore what the classification and management of invasive species might tell us about the uneasiness of the islands within broader configurations of the nation. We begin at the macro level to see one example in which Scottish invasion biology exemplifies the connections with racialised border policing that Subramaniam discusses. I then move specifically to Uist to detail some of the ways in which invasiveness is mobilised in everyday
debates, and examine this tension between the native and the nation, offering an account of some of the problems of deer management and a comparison between the mink and hedgehog, two non-native invasive predators in the islands with very different relationships to the nation.

The Scottish Invasive Species Initiative (SISI), a partnership between NatureScot, the University of Aberdeen, and several local fisheries trusts, provides a good case in point for the synchronised idioms of invasive species control and border policing, in the context of increased criminalisation of irregular migration to the United Kingdom. One outreach programme run by the SISI and aimed at schoolchildren is entitled Alien Detectives. See below a worksheet from the programme, for an exercise called a “Scene of Crime Report”. In this exercise children are asked to become detectives in search of alien “criminals”.

![Alien Detectives Scene of Crime Report worksheet](image)

Fig. 7: SISI Alien Detectives Scene of Crime Report worksheet
What is interesting here is the ways in which the criminal agency shifts between the invasive species itself and the person who introduced it. The ‘motives’ and the ‘suspects’ are implicitly human (“who brought it here and why”), while the crimes themselves seem to be located in the effects of the invasive species on local wildlife, and the “proposed sentence” (‘what action could be taken to control or eradicate this species’) is enacted on the species itself. The dislocation of motive, criminal, crime and sentencing illustrates a certain slipperiness in the concept of non-nativeness or invasiveness, and its connections with national narratives about the danger of those who transgress the United Kingdom’s borders without permission. On a national programme level, then, we can see that there is evidence supporting the arguments made by scholars such as Subramaniam. But what happens when we zoom in on a particular place, in this case, Uist?

The contestedness and constructedness of invasion biology, as discussed in the previous section, is certainly borne out in the social circulation of invasiveness in public discussions in Uist, as many species are commonly described, whether rightly, wrongly, or somewhere in between, as non-native and invasive. Species come to be understood as “invasive” on top of non-native when they impact on human economic activity. Many species whose “alienness” is under dispute come to be accused of being invasive species by various actors looking to make use of label of invasiveness for their own ends – this happens with seals, eagles, and deer fairly regularly in everyday discourse, as islanders generally speaking are far more concerned about native species who become invasive in that they impact on daily life and livelihoods. Geese, deer, and eagles are far more destructive to them than hedgehogs, mink and rhododendron. I have heard white-tailed eagles, reintroduced to Rum and spread to the islands, described as invasive because of their (contested) predation on sheep, and non-native due to their status as a reintroduced species – thus native to the place perhaps, but to that place in a different time. Once while working with a member of RSPB staff he received a phone call from a journalist who asked him to comment on the effect that these eagles were having on “native wildlife”, namely their alleged decimation of the mute swan population on Loch Druidibeg in South Uist. In fact, he told the journalist (and afterwards me), the mute swan was introduced to Harris on the Amhuinsuidhe estate in the late 1800s, and escaped to Uist. Thus, the eagle, as a reintroduced native species, was merely reducing the population of a (non-invasive) alien species. Clearly, my interlocutor told me,
the journalist was on the hunt for a headline along the lines of “Introduced Eagle Impacts Native Wildlife”, aware of the power of non-nativeness as an attention-grabbing addition to a headline.

Similarly, with high numbers of deer causing problems for crofters, there are rumblings of invasiveness in calls for increased management. To say the least, deer management is a controversial issue in the islands. Deer herds are traditionally an important part of Highland estate economies, both for the aesthetics of the place and the impact that may have on
tourism revenue as icons of Scottish wilderness (think Landseer’s iconic painting, *The Monarch of the Glen*, above) and, more concretely, shooting parties provide an income stream for the estate. The South Uist estate also generates revenue by butchering and selling wild venison at the estate office in Daliburgh. Deer are also a nuisance for residents. Throughout Scotland, they are a major cause of road accidents, especially at night, and considerable effort is expended by the South Uist estate staff scaring deer away from the main spinal road every morning before rush hour. Deer cause damage to crops and gardens, and make forestry an extremely difficult enterprise: to grow trees anywhere in Uist, you effectively have to grow them inside a giant cage, with high deer fences to prevent the nutrient-rich saplings from being eaten. South Uist also has extremely high rates of tick-borne Lyme disease, such that contracting Lyme is almost an inevitable rite of passage for living in the islands, one that it took me a year and a half to complete myself. Debates rage on about the multiple causes of Lyme, but deer are high on the list of suspects, transporting ticks around the islands and providing places where ticks can share bacteria with each other by feeding on the same animal’s blood. All this to say, deer are tolerated with some reservation. In March of 2023, the South Uist Estate held a vote on a proposed total cull of the deer population on the estate. The motion was decisively defeated, but the fact that it was called at all is indicative of the scale of the dislike among certain elements in the community.

As one member of the Deer Management group put it to me, “some genius has told them that the deer are a non-native invasive species, and that’s very hard to argue with”. There is significant disagreement over exactly when and how the deer arrived in Uist. A North Uist resident who has been involved in deer management told me that this was “very much a South Uist argument”. The North Uist herd is considerably older – an ancient herd with more in common with European populations than with mainland Scottish – but the South Uist herd is indeed an addition of the twentieth century, in the 1970s. However, I was also told that much of the Scottish herd of red deer has since interbred with invasive Sika deer, while the red deer of Uist is genetically pure and therefore an important genetic resource of “native” deer. Thus the “native” deer of North Uist are testaments to the movement of people between the islands and the mainland in the distant past, while the deer of South Uist are arguably invasive to the island but since their introduction the species has become
endangered through interbreeding with a non-native deer species elsewhere. Thus an “invasive” species becomes a valuable genetic resource for deer “native” to the nation as a whole. Regardless of this, it is clear that people are aware that by evoking the language of invasion biology, the attention of management professionals can be drawn to issues as it is “hard to argue with” if a species can be designated as “invasive” if it is also “non-native”, and the designation of wildlife as “native” or not forms a common theme in public wildlife management conversations.

However even if a species is undisputedly designated as invasive, this does not guarantee the same outcome. To examine this peculiarity, I compare the management of hedgehogs and American mink in the islands, examining scientific literature and everyday discourse to question why the American mink receives so much more violent suppression than the hedgehog. The core difference between the two, I will argue, is that the American mink is of, obviously, American origin, while the hedgehog is native to the United Kingdom mainland, where it was recently (in 2020) added to the IUCN Red List of species vulnerable to extinction. Meanwhile, mink are deemed a “damaging non-native species” according to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and a “priority species for control” according to the Scottish Natural Heritage Species Management Framework (Bryce et al., 2011).

Mink were first introduced in the United Kingdom in 1929 for fur farming, and feral populations were well established by the time this practice was banned in 2002 (Martin and Lea, 2019). In the western isles, they escaped from two fur farms established in the 1950s on the Isle of Lewis, which closed in the 60s. For context, mink production was actively encouraged by the government as a valuable export – in 1968, around the time the fur farm escape in the Western Isles occurred, it contributed £1.5 million to the economy, while the annual budget of the Nature Conservancy (the official nature conservation body) was only £1.1 million (Sheail, 2014). Breeding populations were found in North Uist in 1999 despite efforts to contain them to Lewis and Harris (Moore et al., 2003). The mink has caused problems in that in the absence of native predators (excepting cats, dogs, and rats), birds such as terns thrived on smaller off-shore islands, but with the arrival of semi-aquatic mink, this ceased to be the case (Clode and MacDonald, 2002).
There are numerous accounts of how the hedgehog arrived in Uist. One account is that four individuals were released in 1982 (Jackson et al., 2004), though I have heard first hand accounts from individuals claiming to have personally introduced hedgehogs into their gardens before this date. Ironically, this was commonly done as a form of natural slug control for environmentally conscious horticulturalists who were unwilling to use chemical pesticides, and unwittingly set off a problematic biological invasion. Hedgehogs are one of a number of factors that threaten vulnerable wading bird populations, and also may be assisted by climatic changes that make the islands a more suitable habitat (Jackson, 2006). Since introduction, they have been linked by successive studies to long-term decline in wading bird populations, for which Uist is an important breeding site (Jackson and Green, 2000; Jackson et al., 2004). In the forty years following the introduction of hedgehogs, populations of dunlin and ringed plover saw the greatest decrease, while oystercatcher and redshank populations actually grew. The largest downward changes were to be found in areas with high hedgehog density (Calladine, 2017: 1982). Hedgehogs have recently (early June 2022) been sighted for the first time in Barra and so are still spreading their range (NatureScot, 2022).

What is important to note about the Jackson studies (the most prominent scientific studies of the hedgehog in Uist ecosystems) is that they do not use the conventional language of invasion biology – hedgehogs are not described as alien, non-native, invasive, or any of the usual loaded terms. Instead they are “introduced predators”. There is some work which implies that hedgehogs are “non-native” but the term is rarely directly attached to them in explicit terms. For instance one of the Jackson studies (2006: 210) opens with the sentence “predation by alien mammal predators is one of the most serious threats to island avifauna” while a more recent study begins its abstract thus: “Non-native predators can cause major declines or even localised extinctions in prey populations across the globe, especially on islands” (Calladine et al., 2017: 1982). Thereafter the hedgehogs are described as “introduced”. By contrast one New Zealand study has no qualms with describing the European hedgehog as an “invasive mammalian bird predator species” (Price et al., 2020). This may seem facetious, but it is a key comparison: the ecosystem in New Zealand is no more or less a stranger to the hedgehog than that in the Western Isles, and yet studies from
the Western Isles are unwilling to use a language of invasion, instead using the passive form “introduced” to describe the hedgehog.

Compare this to the American mink. The characterisation of hedgehogs as “introduced’ can be contrasted with that of the American mink as “invasive predators” by scientific studies coming from the same time period (see Clode and MacDonald, 2002; Moore et al., 2003). The mink is described directly as invasive in most studies: for example, simply “invasive American mink” (Oliver et al., 2016) or as an “invasive mammal” (Moore et al., 2003; Martin and Lea, 2019), “invasive carnivore” (Roy et al., 2015). One study, having described mink as an “established alien” goes on in the next sentence to state that “mink are responsible for a conservation crisis with numerous native species badly affected” (Bryce et al., 2011: 576). Thus the hedgehog in Scottish conservation circles is linked indirectly with language of invasion, while the American mink has invasiveness directly ascribed to it, and is deemed “responsible” for its actions. This implication is also present in the name of the respective eradication programmes. The project whose aim is ultimately the eradication of hedgehogs from the islands was titled the Uist Wader Research Project, while that charged with elimination of mink is titled the Hebridean Mink Project. In this, the hedgehog is implied to be a secondary character, while the mink takes centre stage as an actor in its own story.

Many studies showed unclear effects on bird colonies by mink predation in the Western Isles, although studies elsewhere had indicated severe impacts (Moore et al., 2003). One such inconclusive study found no statistically significant differences in breeding success for tern colonies in mink-inhabited and mink-free areas, although there was a correlation found between presence of mink and defensive redistribution of colony size patterns into larger groups (Clode and MacDonald, 2002). A study based on developing mathematical models have suggested large benefits for tern colonies in areas where mink is controlled, but by its own admission this is “a simplified caricature of reality” (Ratcliffe et al., 2008: 119). Actual experimental studies found 2.4 times the breeding success for wading birds in areas from which hedgehogs had been removed versus those with high densities of hedgehog (Jackson, 2001). On the other hand, hedgehog density has been found to be a significant indicator of wader nest failure – hedgehog accounted for 52% of all recorded nest predation events in
South Uist in a study carried out in 1990 and 21% in one carried out between 2012 and 2014 (Calladine, 2017). Others reported levels of predation as high as 55% in areas of high hedgehog density – 52% of all predation events at wader nests were by hedgehogs (Macellan, 2015). This report concluded that wader populations could only recover in the event of eradication of hedgehogs. Other studies (e.g. Jackson and Green, 2000; Jackson et al., 2006) found that hedgehog presence was likely to cause regional extinctions of “internationally important bird populations” (Jackson and Green, 2000: 333). This is not to say that the mink is not a damaging invasive predator, but rather that studies whose findings are more damning for hedgehogs used much more neutral language, while those with less conclusive language about mink impacts used much stronger language.

The hedgehog is characteristically portrayed as somewhat bumbling – see Jackson (2006: 216) for accounts that they are likely to come across the nests and eggs of wading birds only by happy accident rather than streamlined predation. On the other hand, studies often note that mink are voracious and vicious, “known to kill in excess of their immediate needs” (Moore et al., 2003: 445; Clode and Macdonald, 2002: 119). This sentiment is echoed by a NatureScot staff member who describes the mink as “really nasty” while the hedgehogs “are just looking for food”. Another conservationist who was involved in the early attempts to eradicate the hedgehog complicated this distinction between the vicious mink and the bumbling hedgehog with the following thought experiment during a conversation on the topic. Imagine a mink attacking a nest with baby birds: the mink is a streamlined predator, very efficient at killing. As such, the bird dies a quick death. The hedgehog, on the other hand, is an inefficient killer and so the bird suffers a much more painful death. The softer attitude towards hedgehogs is attributed by her to Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, a popular children’s book character invented by Beatrix Potter.

Nonetheless, the rosy perception is mirrored in public reactions to eradication efforts. Mink trapping efforts have been found to be highly effective (Roy et al, 2015), although earlier claims to have fully eradicated the mink have turned out to be premature as trapping is ongoing. Elsewhere in northeast Scotland, the “largest mainland invasive species eradication effort worldwide” took place, mobilising significant community support and relying largely on volunteer labour to successfully suppress mink recolonisation – an approach which is
noted to be vastly different from the Hebridean approach of utilising only paid staff (Bryce et al., 2011). Meanwhile, the British public reacted in outcry when the hedgehog eradication project was initiated in the 2000s. I spoke to conservationists who were physically intimidated by protestors who came over from the mainland to prevent lethal hedgehog control. In 2007, lethal control was paused, and live relocations to the mainland were adopted as an alternative, and much more costly, strategy (apparently with quite low survival rates for the repatriated hedgehogs). Of course the reason that hedgehogs are endangered is not a simple question of “not enough hedgehogs” that can be solved by transporting new ones from elsewhere, and so of course the relocated hedgehogs meet the same problems as their mainland cousins, to whose unsuitable habitats they have been moved. So why would this practice have been continued for several years (it is currently inactive pending a funding bid) nonetheless?

Webb and Rafaelli’s (2008) study demonstrates that both sides of the conflict – i.e. those advocating a hedgehog cull to protect wading birds versus those opposing a cull on animal rights grounds – make arguments based on economy. The animal rights activists point out that the cull has cost the taxpayer a large amount of money, while the pro-wader groups emphasise the importance of the waders within the context of machair biodiversity, and the importance of that biodiversity in the local Uist economy (ibid., 1202). What the authors of this study do not pick up on is that their pro-wader groups were represented largely by organisations with staff living on-island (some of whom with family ties to the region, others with longstanding experience living there), while the animal rights activists were primarily based elsewhere. Now compare this to the kinds of economy stressed in the account offered by Webb and Rafaelli. Those environmentalists with an awareness of and experience with Uist were concerned with biodiversity as it relates to supporting local livelihoods, while those without the close experience of the region are concerned in their economic analysis with national-level expenses footed by “the taxpayer”: that is, eradication campaigns are expensive and cost the national taxpayer inordinate sums of money. So in this study we can see the hedgehog and its survival is allied to the national British taxpayer, while the survival of Uist biodiversity with the eradication of a mainland invader is something only valued by those with a stake in local economic wellbeing.
Meanwhile there was no credible opposition to mink control, and people who I have asked about the apparent discrepancy in attitudes towards the two animals have seemed to find nothing strange in it at all. As one wildlife professional put it when I was questioning the different treatments of the two species, “the mink really don’t belong here.” This gets to the heart of the issue: the mink is considered to be American, while the hedgehog is still in some sense native. While the hedgehog is out of place in the islands, it does not transgress national borders and so it is understandable to give it preferential treatment, even translocation, even if this ultimately leads to poor outcomes for individuals. Neither animal belongs, but the American mink “really” does not belong. This echoes the sentiments of the ecological studies which adopt a fairly soft approach to hedgehogs compared to mink, vis-à-vis the quality of “invasiveness”. It should also be emphasised that the opposition to the killing of hedgehogs was primarily a phenomenon emanating from the mainland, in particular national animal protection charities. One friend of mine recalls fondly how, for a time when she was at school, bounties of £20 were offered for hedgehogs (dead or alive). She and her classmates would go out and hunt hedgehogs, proudly comparing their weekend hauls at school on Monday. On the surface, this tells us something about pragmatic islander attitudes towards the natural environment. On closer inspection, however, the contrast between this and the violent mainlander protests tells us something about the nation through emotional responses to ecology.

To islanders, the mink and the hedgehog are both invasive, neither belong in the island ecosystem, and both are to be eradicated. To UK mainlanders, this attitude was acceptable in relation to the American mink, but not for the hedgehog, a decidedly British animal. By comparing the two invasive species control measures and discourses, what is at stake are questions about the extent to which the Western Isles might be ecologically continuous – or not – with mainland Britain. If the hedgehog belongs to the islands more than the mink does, then the islands’ and islanders’ belonging to the United Kingdom is naturalised. Control of hedgehogs is not ongoing because of the large financial burden of the relocation approach, while mink eradication has continued. This approach is the only publicly acceptable means at a national level because the hedgehog is considered in need of protection in the United Kingdom at large. Ultimately, then, what is being protected is the
discursive integrity of the United Kingdom as an ecological unit, as much as the biodiversity of the islands as a separate ecological entity.

**Gaelic Indigeneity**

How, then, does all of this relate to Gaelic? Apart from the contested nativity of wildlife, this discourse often slips into an awareness of its human resonances. In the terms set out by the Selge and Fischer (2011), a study referenced in the introduction of this chapter, discourses around indigeneity prove an excellent source domain for making sense of biological invasion. In what follows, I first provide examples of where this has come up in conversations with interlocutors, and then examine the growing discourse of indigeneity among Gaelic speakers. If, like native wildlife, the humans native to the islands are threatened by external invaders, then who are those invaders, and why might they seek to mobilise indigeneity as a mode to understand this problem as well as to advocate on their own behalf?

An incomer resident of the South Uist middle district, an area which is home to the largest population of deer on the island, told me:

> And you know this deer story encapsulates all the issues rolled into one. Partly because deer are a species who have been brought in here. They’re not indigenous to here. It’s a bit like incomers - when do you finally get to say that deer and incomers are indigenous, at what point in their life? They certainly weren’t here before. They were brought over here in order to have a sporting estate and rich people coming - I was listening on the radio about some legislation in Africa to stop trophy hunters from going over and shooting the lovely animals and the interviewer said something about how is that different from people coming over here and shooting deer and sticking their antlers on the wall?

In this excerpt we see a contested invasive species compared to two core social issues that define island life. First, my interlocutor compares invasive species to incomers, in a way that echoes Mairi, whose words opened this chapter (albeit here there is a less polemic tone).
Second, she compares the maintenance of deer hunting estates to the continuation of the colonial practice of big game hunting in Africa. In both instances, incomers are compared to invasive species (as Mairi does), and metaphorically linked with issues of colonialism, either with the use of the word “indigenous” or a direct comparison to a colonial practice. In this sense it is clear that there is a strong correspondence in the minds of many between invasion biology and the politics of empire.

A further example: there are efforts to protect and preserve the natural environment from threats that are perceived to be alien to the ecology of the islands, however incomplete and contradictory they might be. On the other hand, reflecting on the various protections afforded to native biodiversity, one crofter/fisherman I spoke to said, “It seem to me like the only ones who aren’t protected are the indigenous people of the islands.” But who, then, are the “indigenous” people of the islands, and what is it that they need to be protected from? In what follows, I trace the public discourse around notions of Gaeldom and indigeneity, and the ways in which these notions are mobilised as modes to advocate for the needs of Gaelic speaking island communities. I draw partly on conversations with interlocutors but focus here largely on written debates that appear in both official publications such as policy documents and academic debates, as well as in unofficial written objects produced by community members in the form of open letters and blog posts. My interlocutor would argue that the primary threat is economic and, in particular, comes from the housing market. As he puts it succinctly: “Holiday homes kill communities”.

The housing crisis facing the islands and a particular strand of thinking on it is well summed up by an article written in Bella Caledonia, which opens as follows:

There is a rural housing crisis which constitutes an economic clearance of young people raised in the Highlands and Islands. This crisis is fatally undermining efforts to maintain the Gaelic language and culture in rural and island communities and threatening their very existence.

Young people, working professionals and families all struggle to get access to housing on the open market. Government ‘help to buy’ schemes, and the proposed
‘Islands Bond’ do not help, they use public money to subsidise further price increases, transferring public funds to private profit. It seems there is a lack of understanding of the nature of the housing market and the extent of the housing crisis. While there is an urgent need for more social and affordable housing, this alone does not address the underlying issue, nor help working professionals compete with investors, retirees, and second home buyers, to buy their own home.

(Mac a’ Bhàillidh, 2022)

Here we can see the competition for housing between Gaelic-speaking people raised in the Highlands and Islands with external actors here identified as “investors, retirees and second home buyers” posited as a direct threat to the “very existence” of Gaelic culture and the communities who maintain it. The ‘Islands bond’ to which the author referred was a proposed (and, following consultation, scrapped) direct payment offered to young people who wish to relocate or remain in the islands, to be used in the purchase of property. As the author notes, the problem remains stuck within the free market logic of the existing system and does nothing to address the fact that the free housing market itself is the cause of the housing crisis, and by extension the crisis facing Gaelic as a community language. The article evokes simultaneously the historical memory of the clearances, titling itself “The Highland Clearances, 2022” and concluding with the statement that “this is an ongoing economic clearance.”

An open letter written by a group of young people from the islands of Uist, Skye, Mull, and Luing in September 2021 echoed this sentiment, using the phrase “contemporary clearances”, and arguing that as a result of the inability of young islanders to financially compete with outsiders on the housing market, “the fabric of our Gaelic language, our crofting, and our Highland and Island communities is being unwoven.” They propose controls of the housing market in the islands such that when a house becomes available it be made available to locals “giving the community first refusal or opportunity for compulsory purchase, prior to its listing on the national market”. Thus the housing crisis and the Gaelic Crisis are commonly phrased as threatened by external house-buyers. The Misneachd 2021 Manifesto, a document which makes a set of policy recommendations for the preservation of Gaelic, also recognises that “radical economic and political structural
changes” are required, among them tacking “uncontrolled land and housing markets” (Misneachd, 2021: 58). Alongside this, the Misneachd Manifesto advocates for the “legal recognition of the Gaels as an indigenous linguistic minority, and of Gaelic-speaking areas, with specific provisions for areas with varying percentages of speakers” (Misneachd, 2021: 56).

Aside from Misneachd, there is a relatively new organisation called Dòrlach, which aims at revitalising Gaelic dialects. Its Instagram bio reads: “Lean gu dlùth ri clìù do shinnsear! [lit. follow closely the reputation of your ancestors]. Building intercultural solidarity & returning to indigenous practice in Gaelic Scotland.” Particularly in the run-up to COP26 but still occasionally, utilising the hashtag #indigenous, Dòrlach posts images with text documenting encounters with indigenous community members from the Americas and elsewhere. This is accompanied with an explicit and self-conscious ethic of decolonisation and solidarity with these groups, while also describing the Gaels as “indigenous” and victims of colonisation. In one video posted on November 2021 on the subject of decolonisation, Àdhamh Ó Broin, a member of the board articulates a lack of identification with whiteness, and the development of an indigenous consciousness throughout his life. Speaking on the complexities and contradictions of Gaelic white indigeneity, he says “you can get up to your eyeballs in it”.

It is worth mentioning that many of the people who move to Uist from the mainland – the investors, retirees, and second home buyers of the Bella Caledonia article – are themselves descended from islander stock, possibly with a generation or two of mainland ancestors in between them. However, while this might be the case on a technical level, there is more to being considered an islander than mere ancestry. One conservation worker I spoke to said that for islanders, you can never really become one of them if you were not raised there and will always be considered an incomer. She cited her own example: with four grandparents and one parent from Uist, and decades spent living in Uist herself, she is still considered by

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17 Incidentally Alexander Nicholson, in his *Gaelic Proverbs*, provides a note that this particular proverb is Ossianic, meaning deriving from the fabricated ancient Gaelic epic poems of Ossian (2018,333), which were in fact written by James MacPherson in the 18th century. Thus while advocating a form of Gaelic identity based on authentic relationships with one’s ancestors it rests itself on a fabricated version of that heritage.
many to be an incomer because she was raised on the mainland. The version of indigeneity espoused by many in the islands, then, has as much to do with the experience of living in the islands as it does with heritage and bloodlines. As one development practitioner put it to me: “you'll never really know what it's like to live here unless you're born and raised here; you only touch on the surface. I've been here quite a while now, but you could be here twenty years and still wouldn't really get it because you’re not a local.”

Equally not all those who might be considered Gaels necessarily identify with this label: as one young crofter said to me: “Do I wake up every morning and say, ‘I am a Gael’? No, I don’t think I do. But I do think that culturally, linguistically, we’re different from someone in the south of Scotland or on the east coast.” The rubric of indigeneity is also not an uncontroversial one beyond academic debates – one person of colour I spoke to was describing a community project:

One of the directors wanted to say indigenous – he had actually written “indigenous” on one of the posters and I said I hate that word, can we delete it? It’s an appropriation of the word. The one time I’ve ever connected people here to the Sami, because I’m really interested in that and I went to Sweden, is how many words they have for snow, where here they have a lot of words for different kinds of rain, and the other thing is their intuition and understanding of the environment which is here, but could easily go.

In both of these examples, there is at best a scepticism and at worst an outright aversion to the discourse of Gaelic indigeneity, while there is also a recognition of the truthfulness of certain aspects of that discourse, that there might indeed be some cultural differences with mainlanders, and there is a certain level of what might be deemed traditional ecological knowledge that is analogous with that of indigenous people such as the Sami.

A recent special issue of Scottish Affairs entitled Scotland’s Gàidhealtachd Futures was edited by two scholars from Skye, James Oliver and Iain MacKinnon and has, along with The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community, sparked acrimonious public debate about the place of Gaelic in Scotland, and the place of the ethnic Gael within that. This issue’s
introduction takes as its point of departure that Gaelic is an “indigenous language and culture” and the “for many tradition and lore coheres the Gàidhealtachd as a complex ontological space and entanglement of relations between the human and more-than-just-human – *an tir, an cànan ‘s na daoine* – the land, the language and the people” (Oliver and MacKinnon, 2021: 148). It positions land commodification as the cause of the “alienation of environments, place and people” (ibid.: 149). A contribution to the issue correlates the extractive logics of colonialism, globalisation, the loss of biodiversity, and the suppression of “the indigenous communities within the islands of Britain and Ireland” (Ó Laoire, 2021: 266-267). Elsewhere the authors of *The Gaelic Crisis* criticise the neoliberal, individualised civic approach to Gaelic as a lifestyle choice rather than a language embedded in particular social and economic inequalities which leads to language shift away from the minority language and towards that of the dominant language – emphasis for them needs to be placed on preserving the integrity of remaining “vernacular” communities in places such as the Western Isles (Ó Giollagháin and Caimbeul, 2021).

MacKinnon’s own contribution to the issue examines the idea of the Gael as an ethnic identity – arguing that Gael as a purely linguistic, and not a cultural identity, is “hugely impoverished” (MacKinnon 2021: 221). Indeed, a blog post from a Lewis commentator made quite a stir towards the end of 2020, taking issue with the idea that learners might use the moniker “gael/gaidheal” to describe themselves: “is not Gàidheal thu; is Gaelic speaker thu.18 There is much more to being a Gael than just speaking the language.” This quickly relates to property and dwelling: “Just as learning Gaelic does not make you a Gael, owning property in Lewis does not make you a Leòdhasch19” and the failure to recognise the difference, she argues, “is contributing to the death of community”. The post argues that indigenous status recognition is vital for the survival of Gaelic, along with controls on the property market: “young people cannot hope to compete with [incomers with more money], or with the other blight on our society: housing for tourism” (Post Tenebras Lux, 2020). Thus we find an increasing use of the tropes of indigeneity tied with Gaelic and, in particular an idea of the close connection of the people, the land and the language of the

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18 “You are not a Gael. You are a Gaelic speaker.”
19 Person from Lewis.
Gàidhealtachd as being closely interconnected and threatened by others moving in to occupy that land.

This is not a new idea. A report written by Iain MacKinnon in 2008 for the Scottish Crofting Federation claims indigeneity for crofters based on the UN principle of self-identification being sufficient for indigenous status, as well as basing it on a cultural definition (rather than racial or genetic) of maintaining continuity with heritage practices. It does this through comparison with the Sami, Europe’s only officially recognised indigenous group, positing the situation of Highlanders begin comparable as an example of “internal colonisation”, and drawing on postcolonial theorists such as Fanon and Freire to articulate the cultural inferiorisation and colonisation of the Gaelic mind.

Over the years claims of indigeneity have been made without success by islanders in Orkney and Shetland based on old Norse legal systems pertaining to use of marine resources (Jones, 2012). It is also claimed by far-right groups on behalf of racially defined “Britons” as an effort to gain relevance in the face of perceived threats by migrants (see Evans, 2012 for a charitable discussion of the BNP). Coming from Ireland, I grew up with similar postcolonial discourses that circulate comparing the Irish to enslaved or otherwise oppressed indigenous peoples. The experience of the people of the Western Isles throughout much of the 18th and 19th centuries was very similar to that of the Irish under British rule. When I was living in the islands I found this train of thought familiar as a common trope in everyday Irish discourse about empire, though it always sat awkwardly with me. However many people in the islands felt strongly that they identify as Gaels, that this is very much to do with the land and the language, and more than once the answer to my question “Would you identify the Gaels as an indigenous people” was some variation of “why wouldn’t you?” So if indigeneity is not a sure thing for gathering support, and has unsavoury connections to right wing movements as well as a number of philosophical pitfalls, why does it seem to be gathering pace within the self-understanding of Gaelic speakers?

Responses written by prominent scholars of Gaelic to the *Scottish Affairs* special issue were strongly worded – arguing that it was “inappropriate” to publish the issue in its final form, as it is “unrepresentative of current thinking in the field” (Macleod et al., 2022: 84). These
scholars argue that indigeneity “would be a strategic and legal dead-end for the Gaelic revitalisation movement and would be wholly unworkable in practice; it could also render the movement structurally racist” (Armstrong et al., 2022: 65). Given their findings that “gael” identity is not widely used (although in my experience many islanders find considerable value in the term), they suggest a muinntir na Gàidhlig or luchd na Gàidhlig (people of the Gaelic language) instead (Armstrong et al., 2022: 70). For them Gael is an aspirational, ideological term rather than “an evidence-based reality” (ibid.). The debate is framed in quite personal terms as MacKinnon (2021: 222) dismisses McLeod’s criticism of the Gael ethnonym while pointing out that MacLeod is a Gaelic learner (as opposed to native speaker) from North America. Armstrong et al. flag this up as an “anti-foreigner dog-whistle” (2022: 71). Overall, the authors of these critiques underline the importance of a civic national approach to Gaelic, which recognises its place in the Lowlands, and de-emphasises the claim to a necessary and deep cultural connection to the landscapes of the Highlands and Islands as the primary anchor of the language.

What can we make of this debate around the Gael as an indigenous person? Indigeneity is a highly contentious topic in anthropology, sparking highly critical debates, often involving accusations of racism (Gausset et al., 2011). The anthropologist Adam Kuper has argued that resurgence in the political power of ‘indigeneity’ has roots in ideas of the primitive in which “authentic natives represent a world to which should, apparently, wish to be returned, a world in which culture does not challenge nature” (Kuper, 2003: 395). Simultaneously, it bases itself in “the European belief that true citizenship is a matter of ties of blood and soil,” and so support for indigenous lifeways embedded in designated homelands is the flipside of racist anti-immigrant rhetoric (ibid.). For Kuper, “policies based on false analysis distract attention from real local issues” (ibid.). The indigeneity concept is merely a revival of notions of the primitive and so is suspect, despite its generally good intentions and isolated examples of successful political deployment.

Although of course with a traditionally Gaelic surname, there is certainly an argument for a claim of Gaeldom based on more than just an ability to speak Gaelic.
Chandler and Reid (2020) critique the notion of “becoming indigenous” espoused by Viveiros de Castro and other anthropologists working on “ontopolitical anthropology” which looks to indigeneity as a sort of intellectual resource to build speculative futures beyond the problems of modernity. In this formulation, claiming indigeneity becomes a sort of essentialised, colonial fantasy of otherness to be utilised by white people in their ontopolitical philosophical machinations. Indigeneity becomes a shorthand for a set of qualities that foreground, in the Anthropocene, a closeness to nature which is problematically similar to primitivist notions of the ‘native’. Furthermore, while official recognition as an indigenous group may offer particular forms of legal protection, the rendering of lifeways and cultures into abstractions acceptable in court by different kinds of experts is likely also to cause forms of epistemic violence, crystalising cultural forms or reinforcing damaging binaries such as that between traditional and modern (Petersman, 2021).

However, others (Duile, 2021) have recently argued that indigeneity itself – as a reaction against or mode of resistance to, dominant capitalist modes of being – in fact recognises and strengthens the overall frameworks of capital and state in their self-counterposition as alternative solidarity-based economies. They also, paradoxically, depend on state apparatus of legal recognition. Indeed, it seems contradictory that indigeneity is largely recognised by the UN, an institution that is founded on the primacy of the nation state (Gausset et al., 2011). Contradictions are an inherent part of the condition of indigeneity, and indeed “are a condition for its existence”: it is, for Duile, a dialectical process in which part of its inverse is constitutive of itself (i.e. it appears as part of colonialism and vice versa) (Duile, 2021: 375).

For MacKinnon (2018), the economic reorganisation of the Gàidhealtachd following Culloden comes with a colonisation of the Gaelic mind: a shift between thinking of the land in terms of dùthchas and thinking of the land in terms of crofting in the course of subsequent waves of land reorganisation, and this shift represents a shift in Gaelic consciousness – calls for privatisation of crofting land by the Federation of Crofters Unions is placed within this context as a continuation of this process of cosmological shift. The inhabitants of crofting land now self-defined as “crofters”, having internalised the “concepts
and attitudes of the domination structure into the self-understanding of Gaelic society” (ibid.: 293-294).

One obvious pitfall to this is its exclusivity and easy ties to racial nationalist frameworks of thought. This thinking of indigeneity in terms of capitalism and enclosure is echoed by other scholars. In a comparison between Scottish land reform and Cree land movements, Kenrick suggests an indigeneity which is not based on sharp insider/outside binaries, but on an anti-capitalism “process of returning local control to local people” (Kenrick, 2011: 194). The argument here is for solidarity based on the fact that “we are all indigenous, in the sense that we all suffer from a dominant and destructive economic system external to local communities” (ibid.: 197). Thus while the term indigenous has the potential to exclude on the basis of “blood and soil,” it is more properly understood as an effort to “exclude external extractive forces exploiting local communities” (ibid.). Indigeneity, like class, is best understood then “not as a some essentialised naturalised identity or category – but as the consequence of relationships of structural inequality” (ibid.: 201).

One further way to circumvent this problematic connection between indigeneity and nationalism is offered by means of autochthony and the state. Zenker proposes that “autochthony” is the expression of a link between individual, group and territory, and that nationalism and indigeneity are two potential political offshoots of this quality. Nationalism mobilises autochthony in ways that build a state around notions of exclusion and borders – it makes claims for the state. Indigeneity operationalises autochthony as a means to make claims from the state on behalf of the group/individual/place, thus positioning itself in opposition to the state (Zenker, 2011).

So this is the reason that the Gaels might turn to indigeneity as a discursive strategy to resist the “economic clearance” wrought by the free housing market. If the islanders are considered to be equally part of the Scottish and British nations as anyone else, then any other members of those nations have equal rights to occupy the land according to the principle of the free market. That is, all British people are autochthonous to Britain. If the islanders are considered to be equally part of the Scottish and British nations as anyone else, then any other members of those nations have equal rights to occupy the land
according to the principle of the free market. However, operationalising indigeneity enables islanders to adopt a different position vis-à-vis the United Kingdom as nation. In Zenker’s terms, it enables a space for demanding something from the state, and in Kenrick’s terms, it imagines a right to exist that might rest on something other than market power. Ultimately, it offers a potential means to argue for protection from the market in the same way that the natural environment is protected, to return to my interlocutor’s observation at the beginning of the section, that everything is protected except the islands’ “indigenous” people. It does this by asserting a sense of who belongs in the islands, via an indigenous identity tied up with the endangerment of Gaelic by economic forces.

**Conclusion**

This is on one level similar to the native of wildlife of the islands, which by its very nativeness exerts a moral imperative over nature conservation actors to protect it from invasive non-native species. An indigeneity discourse attempts to do the same thing by evoking an international framework of rights to claim certain protections from the state, again protections against incursion from external forces. The two discourses have obvious resonances with each other and as I have shown they are often combined and contrasted in discussions of one or the other. In the case of the Gaels, as opposed to the wading birds of the machair, the invocation of these ideas to inspire action is considerably less successful. This is due to a number of factors, not least that if biological invasiveness is contested, the indigenous status of the islander is significantly more so. However the situation is not quite so simple as: indigeneity is an effective mobiliser of support for nature conservation but not for linguistic revitalisation. As has been shown, the effectiveness of the discourse has uneven effects on different animal bodies. Here I am referring to the hedgehog/mink comparison which might go some way to linking the two discourses and understanding what they tell us about island life.

Both discourses aim at constructing a means to understand who and what belongs where but this appears to have wildly different objectives. The ecological discourse and the practices engendered by it aim towards an affirmation of the nation through selective eradication and salvation of invasive alien predators and an obfuscation of the social
production of particular kinds of landscapes through the removal of rhododendron. It also reifies the separation of human from nature, and sees human interference in the ecological system as a polluting factor to be undone. In it we see competition for housing between Gaelic-speaking people raised in the Highlands and Islands with external actors here identified as “investors, retirees and second home buyers” posited as a direct threat to the “very existence” of Gaelic culture and the communities who maintain it. In this way there is a direct link between certain kinds of human population threatening the islands’ cultural minority. In the context of this, we find the use of the language of indigeneity is on the rise, and many Gaelic activists have begun using the word “indigenous” or organising solidarity events with indigenous peoples in the Americas. Ultimately, what we can see through the discourses of belonging, and a comparison between them, is the ways in which the islands’ human inhabitants variously interpret themselves and their environment in relation to the nation, and some of the potential interconnections and tensions between different ways of thinking about what belongs.

Unlike the invasive species rhetoric explored by Subramaniam where a majority culture identifies migrant minorities as an invasive species within national borders, a discourse of indigeneity allows for a minority to turn invasive species rhetoric against the majority culture: one person describes mainland conservationists as ‘non-native and invasive’ and another calls for protection of the ‘indigenous’ people of the islands alongside its indigenous wildlife. This is to many a nonsensical proposition that some inhabitants of the United Kingdom might consider themselves less members of a unified whole and more as victims of colonisation. Yet national invasive species narratives can reinforce ideals of the homogeneity of the British isles as a single ecological border. This can be extrapolated from the different treatment of the hedgehog and the mink: the hedgehog does not belong in the ecological system of the islands, but it does belong to the nation, while the American mink “really does not belong” there, not native to any part of the nation, and as such is treated very differently. Both discourses of belonging are built on shaky conceptual ground, yet they have different levels of impact – one that destabilises the unity of the United Kingdom or of Scotland finds little purchase, and one which reifies that unity through selective application is a powerful driver of environmental management initiatives. In this way these two discourses of belonging – indigeneity and invasiveness – become tools for the negotiation of
the meaning of the national borders of the UK, and who and what belongs in Uist becomes an expression of questions about who and what belongs in the nation as a whole.
CHAPTER SIX
The Social Life of Doom: Prophecy and Prediction of Linguistic and Environmental Loss

Introduction: Climate Change and Language Death

Inhabitants of Uist live in the shadow of frequent pronouncements of the imminent death of Gaelic as a community language in one of its last remaining strongholds. They also live with near-constant reminders of the threat of climate change and biodiversity loss: the islands, being low-lying and with a dune-based west coast, are particularly vulnerable to rising seas and extreme weather events, while their valuable biodiversity is menaced by a wide variety of potential hazards, not least among them climate change itself. The loss of Gaelic language and the lifeways that go along with it in the islands and the loss or change of the natural world go hand in hand: much of the crofting land in the islands is low-lying – the cattle and sheep that form the foundation of most crofters’ production spend much of the year on the low-lying sand-dune machair landscape, which in some areas is being lost at a high rate.

There are also of course deep interconnections between the natural environment and occupations traditionally associated with Gaelic, for the most part those engaged in primary production of food: crofting and fishing. There is a widespread understanding that crofting and Gaelic are closely connected, community level crofting work being one of the major spaces in which intergenerational transmission of the language still takes place in many townships. This accompanies significant evidence that crofting lifeways have the potential to produce and maintain habitats for a wide variety of internationally important biodiversity – this is concentrated on the machair, a site of highly valuable plant biodiversity as well as a vital breeding site for a number of rare wading and migratory bird species. Fishing, one of the few local industries in which Gaelic is at least for some the linguistic medium, is highly vulnerable to climate change and biodiversity loss. The deep connection between fishing and Gaelic has been demonstrated in recent scholarship – Course and MacMillan (2021) have argued that the fishing industry is, similarly to crofting, a vital site at which
intergenerational transmission of Gaelic takes place. This includes more than just linguistic competency, but also considerable local environmental knowledge as well as an ethic of stewardship which has benefits for the marine environment and biodiversity. As such, climate change threatens biodiversity directly by altering the habitats on which wildlife depends, but it also indirectly threatens biodiversity by menacing the sustainable human livelihoods which create and maintain the complex socioecological systems on which both Gaelic and natural ecologies rely.

The islands, and particularly the lifeways of their Gaelic, crofting communities have long been subject to predictions of imminent disappearance. The crofting system has however proven “a remarkably durable agricultural system, defying those who predicted its demise” (MacDonald 1997, 238). In fact, as was highlighted in the previous chapter’s discussion on lexicographic work, a sense of doom has long pervaded Gaelic discourses and has been a core aspect of the intellectual framework of preservation and revitalisation efforts. Therefore a sense of loss and predictions of language death could be said to have been conducive to the very survival and resilience of Gaelic. This chapter examines themes of prophecy and prediction as mediated through texts and experienced by residents of the islands. After a general discussion of the theme of prophecy and prediction in Gaelic culture, I consider the ways in which people’s perceptions of their futures move through different forms of entextualisation of their present or past, and how people live their lives in the awareness of the continual release of various reports and models that predict the end of their way of life. The doom-talk of the Gaelic world is mirrored in discourses surrounding climate change, which often adopt apocalyptic predictive language to describe a future that they seek to avoid. In what follows I examine the places where predictions of catastrophic climate change intersect with predictions of Gaelic language death. Drawing on the insight that there is a strong tendency within Gaelic self-understandings to stress the imminent disappearance of the Gael, I will argue that the mode of prediction is employed as a discursive method to bring about particular effects in the world: in this case, predictions of loss are employed in order to prevent their own coming to fruition, in a kind of reverse performativity.
Predicting and Modelling the Future

Anthropological work on forecasting has paid attention to the ways in which various forms of experience and expertise produce different versions of environmental futures, and in which the people engaged in these productions work to influence which of these potential futures might come to be (Haines, 2019). Taddei has argued that forecasting is “a fundamentally political social action” (2013: 260). It relies on a shared understanding of reality and may represent a “conservative reaction against reality”, that is, by “colonising” the future through the projection of conceptual schemes and tropes onto it and “making the future conceptually mimic the present/past” (ibid.: 257). That is, the past and present are projected onto the future in a dominant temporal scale that “makes both the past/present and the future look and feel simpler, more stable, and more rationally organised” (ibid.). The prediction then creates a shared experience of the past and present while producing a synchronised imagination of the possible future, facilitating particular forms of social action and disabling others. Tsing (2005) has also argued for the performative intentions of climate modelling, seeking to engender particular forms of globally-oriented policy.

On a less abstract level, anthropological work has revealed the ways in which predictive genres work to entail and not just describe concrete potential futures, with negative impacts on vulnerable naturecultures, for example Westman’s (2013) study of Social Impact Assessments of Tar Sands projects and their detrimental effects on indigenous lifeways through inscribing the inevitability of their eventual acculturation to a settler model. Taddei argues that “the scientific disciplines most dependent on forecasting (meteorology, economics, and even political science) are those that systematically depoliticise it, focusing exclusively on its technical dimensions” (2013: 260). It is not solely the case, however, that prediction is a tool of statecraft and domination: as Mathews and Barnes point out, “futures are everywhere remade” through “popular stories about the future, gossip about the credibility of official predictions, and accounts of conspiracies” (2016: 3). Prediction through statistical modelling is thus often deployed in such a way as to leverage the performative potential of the predictive utterance to engender political action. The statistical prediction, however, is also experienced by people on the ground. As Frazier observes in her study of
climate change discourse in Bengaluru, India, estimations of future weather as mediated through climate models are not just intellectually understood but are “critical to how people narrate their felt experiences of heat” (2019: 444).

In the case of languages, Heller and Duchêne (2008) point out that predictive discourses that cast languages as being “endangered” fall into one of two camps: one that compares linguistic diversity with biodiversity and argues for the ecological importance of conserving the former, and one which constructs linguistic diversity as a component of global cultural heritage. Either way, these discourses subscribe to a particular “language ideology” in which languages “have to be understood as things we can count, and as bounded spaces independent in some way of other forms of social practice” (2008: 3). For them, language endangerment discourse is “about some broader sense of endangerment, about some threat from outside (from some Other) to the social order” (ibid.: 4). The discussion of language endangerment in this formulation is to engage in “the reproduction of the central legitimating ideology of the nation state” through a particular engagement with ideas of legitimate diversity and protection (ibid.: 6). This idea echoes Taddei’s notions about climate prediction’s performative nature in producing and reproducing dominant ideologies. Along with other scholars of prediction, I question whether this is necessarily the case. However, the question posed by Duchêne and Heller is an interesting one – “who benefits and who loses from understanding languages the way we do, what is at stake for whom, and how and why [does] language [serve] as a terrain for competition”? (ibid.: 11).

The Salvage Paradigm and Doom as Generative Discourse

The historical geographer Fraser MacDonald has described the outworking of the “salvage paradigm” in the islands, especially in application to fieldwork in geography, archaeology, and folklore. This is the idea that objects of research are deemed vulnerable to extinction and, as a consequence, in need of saving by the researcher. The argument here is that fieldwork becomes “a way of constructing social life as much as rescuing it” (2011: 311) – that is, it is “generative creation of social life which is orchestrated under the sign of its loss or rescue” (MacDonald, 2011: 313). MacDonald draws the phrase “Doomsday survey” from a 1950s geographical proposal for a crofting survey in the context of the testing range for
nuclear missiles, with its “apocalyptic urgency” and “sense of foreboding, of impending judgement” (ibid.: 314). This is ultimately transformed into the term “doomsday fieldwork,” which is argued to have a performative power which both (re)produces its own object of study as “existing agricultural arrangements like subletting were sustained through being documented” (ibid.: 318) and also reproduces the academic discipline through the opportunity for training in fieldwork methods.

This approach will be instructive here. The salvage paradigm in research and the forms of doomsday fieldwork that it engenders have at their heart a prediction that the object of their interest is soon to disappear. However they do more than describe the thing soon to be lost. They produce and reproduce these things in particular forms deemed desirable by their recorders. For example, Alexander Carmichael, a 19th century collector of Gaelic folklore, largely in the Western Isles and author of Carmina Gadelica, could be said to operate within the framework of salvage. In the introduction to the original edition, he states that “the genii of the Highlands are disappearing before the spirit of modernism…and their native land…will all too soon know them no more. Let an attempt be made even yet to preserve their memories ere they disappear for ever” (Carmichael, 1992 [1899]: 31). John Macinnes, in the preface to the 1992 edition, notes the controversy surrounding the accuracy of the recording, and the general understanding that much of Carmina Gadelica may be best understood as a literary achievement, aiming to present the material in its finest literary form rather than it “truest’ manifestation (MacInnes 1992). The text in question seeks to demonstrate that the “oral literature” of the Gàidhealtachd is “unsurpassed by anything similar in the ancient classics of Greece or Rome” (Carmichael, 1992: 21) but is “now becoming meagre in quantity, inferior in quality, and greatly isolated” (ibid.: 24). In Uist today, Carmina Gadelica is well known and highly regarded in the Gaelic community as a source of oral tradition. When discussing the inauthenticity of some of its content with a local, fluent Gaelic speaker, the observation was made that this was acceptable because “even if it’s not authentic, at least we have something.”

The implication here is that those things were bound to disappear were it not for their recording in text, and now if they re-enter circulation in oral culture having been mediated by their inaccurate entextualisation, this is preferable to their disappearance. Indeed, seen
as an important source of material, it is likely that its contents have re-entered oral tradition in their edited form. In this way, we can see how the doomsday fieldwork of Carmichael, influenced by his prognostication of the degeneration and disappearance of Gaelic oral culture, produces the object it wishes to save in a slightly different form to that in which it is found. In the context of its writing, when considerable anti-Gaelic sentiment was commonplace, the presentation of the material as equal to the “ancient classics” can be seen as part of a bid to construct a Gaelic literature that is worthy of being saved from its predicted disappearance. Thus the prediction of loss engenders forms of preservative writing which alter the phenomenon to be lost. Richardson has also argued that in studies of the second sight, “the meanings attributed to the prophetic vision arise, then, not from the Gaelic-speaking communities in which they are said to take place, rather they are imposed by outside observers” (2017: 5). If this is the case, then it is of use to scrutinise who makes the pronouncements of doom, based on what data, and how these predictions circulate, in order to understand how the prediction of loss might impact upon the thing whose demise it predicts.

The Gaelic Tradition of Prophecy

If there is a long history of predictions emerging from academics in various fields regarding the islands and their future, there is also wealth of prophecy and prediction emanating from the Gaelic tradition. The Gaelic scholar Michael Newton observes that:

The theme of prophecy appears in virtually all genres of Scottish Gaelic literature, written and oral, in every era from which we have surviving evidence. Prophecy has often been used towards social and political ends, especially as propaganda at times of crisis and discord.

(Newton, 2010: 144)

Much of this prophecy has a millenarian character – that is, it predicts “the imminent coming of a new and better world”. Drawing on anthropological studies of Hopi prophecy, Newton argues that the tradition of prophecy in Gaelic culture enables “a native telling
history”, by rephrasing the essence of current events in a Gaelic idiom – it was thus “used to attempt to control the cultural damage from the tumultuous and humiliating calamities of the Clearances” (ibid.: 153). Thus for Newton, the prophetic theme in literature is an “important cultural resource” which can serve to mobilise support for a cause, and to explain disruptions to social order in a traditional context (cf Taddei’s conception of predictive models as ways of domesticating the future within a framework of the present social world). For Richardson, prophecy is a form of historiographic intervention which, on a philosophical level “refuses linear formations of time to conflate the present with the future, so that the effects are ascertained before their cause comes into existence”. More concretely, the prophecy’s temporal confusion upsets a teleological historiography in which the Gaels are cast as belonging in a primitive past, while “against the universalising gestures and grand narratives of dominant historiography, the histories produced by second sight attend to the local and the quotidian” (Richardson, 2017: 8). Thus the Gaelic tradition of prophecy represents a means to make sense of the present and past and to generate a sense of agency in the face of marginalising forces of history.

Such prophecies circulate throughout songs, poetry and continue to do so in oral tradition today. This is less common in more recent times, but Newton cites as a recent example the South Uist poet Dòmhnal Ruach Mac an t-Saoir’s protest song against the military rocket range in South Uist Na Rocaidean (The Rockets): “a famous seer foretold in the days of old that destruction would come upon Scotland when it would fall from that location” (ibid.: 155). One which was repeated to me and crops up commonly in discussion of the environmental politics of crofting comes from the Brahan Seer: that Uist would one day be overrun with English people and greylag geese.

I spoke to a Gaelic-speaking former gamekeeper about the goose population threatening crofting in its current form. The goose population is just one among many potential threats cited against crofting. He told me that the goose population had increased 100% in South Uist and 80% in North Uist in the previous two years (this conversation took place in January 2020). A member of NatureScot told him that their model predicted a potential population of 20,000 geese in Uist within four to five years. At 15,000, my interlocutor argued, crofting would cease to exist as a livelihood. He cited the prophecy of the Brahan Seer that Uist
would one day be covered in English people and greylag geese. This nicely illustrates the way in which different forms of entextualisations can bridge prophetic and predictive genres to co-produce versions of the future which might then be utilised in public fora. Statistical entextualisations of goose populations are fed into mathematical models to produce a further text, that of their predicted future population. This is then juxtaposed with a Gaelic prophecy – much in the manner described by Newton, reconfiguring present threats within a domesticated Gaelic idiom – which serves three purposes. Firstly it triangulates the mathematical-biological model and seeks to provide confirmation. Secondly, it puts the Gaelic prophecy on a par with that form of technoscientific knowledge, casting this traditional knowledge form as being valid data in its own right, and indeed as having predicted something that ecological science has only done at a point which may already be too late. Thirdly, it emphasises the political import of the goose population by inscribing its growth within a politics of external domination of the Gaelic islands by English-speakers. In this way Gaelic and population modelling emerge as resources for each other.

Similar prophecies to that of the English and the geese are widespread. Thomas the Rhymer, a seer from the Scottish Borders, apparently predicted that "the time is coming, when all the wisdom of the world shall centre in the grey goose's quill; and the jawbone of the sheep cover the coulter of the plough with rust" (Newton, 2010: 149). Stewart (1998/1999: 216) cites a song by the Angus MacMhuirich, bard to Clan Ranald in the late eighteenth century:

The jaws of sheep have made the land rich
But we were told by the prophecy
That sheep would scatter the warriors
And turn their homes into a wilderness.
The land of our love lies under bracken and
Heather, every plain and every field is
Untilled, and soon there will be none in the
Mull of Tress but Lowlanders and
Their white sheep.
Similarly, Coinneach Odhar is purported to have made the claims that "the clans will become so effeminate as to flee from their native country before an army of sheep" and "The day will come when the Big Sheep will overrun the country until they strike (meet) the northern sea", the Big Sheep in question being a translation of a phrase usually referring to deer (Mackenzie 1888, 10). Throughout these prophecies we see common themes of sheep (particularly their jaws), geese and deer. All three of these species feature heavily in debates around the future of the islands, its natural environment, and the crofting community. Thus these predictions maintain their political salience today, and find themselves repeated regularly, albeit not by all of the islands’ inhabitants, rather by those with a particular interest in Gaelic folk tradition. As Newton suggests, the prophecy finds its place in contemporary discourse as a way to circumscribe an unpredictable present within a Gaelic worldview.

This prophecy comes from Coinneach Odhar, also known as the Brahan Seer, a well-known, legendary 17th century predictor of the future from Lewis (see Matheson 1969-70 for a discussion of the likely composite, if not fictional nature of the historical Brahan Seer). That the prophetic mode can emerge from narratives of the struggle of Gaelic society against external forces is well illustrated by one of the Brahan Seer’s origin stories reported by Mackenzie (1888, 6): the seer was employed as a labourer on the Brahan estate near Inverness and had drawn the ire of the lady of the household with his sharp wit. While he was cutting peat, she had a poisoned meal sent up to him. Meanwhile the Coinneach fell asleep, and woke with a white stone with a hole in it on his chest. When he looked through the hole he saw the plot on his life, and thus was saved, feeding the poisoned food to his dog in order to confirm the vision’s veracity. What we see here is, in the early days of the upheaval of Highland Society following the unification of Scotland and England and the Statutes of Iona, the gift of prophecy being bestowed upon a common highlander as a means to resist violence done upon him by the increasingly anglicised gentry. Thus predicting imminent doom has long been a feature of Gaelic discourse, and in particular has been a mode for building a sense of resilience and galvanising support for preservation.
Gaelic as a Resource for Navigating Future Change

If the futurity of Gaelic literature can be situated within a resistance against political victimisation, the Gaelic tradition also provides rich resources for navigating a future landscape altered by climate change on a less political level. There is a long and rich thread of lore in Uist about the loss of coastline, such as Am Baile Sìar and Bail’ Hùsabost, two settlements between the now uninhabited Heisgeir and the town ship of Baleshare which lies on an island off the west coast of North Uist. Both were lost in a storm in the 16th century, while numerous other settlements can still be seen at low tide in some places (Crouse, 2021). The name Baleshare itself bears witness to the islands’ long history of losing land to the sea: it is an anglicisation of am Baile Sear, meaning the eastern village. This is perplexing to the uninitiated since the township is located on a sliver of land off the west coast of North Uist. Its name however is a remnant of its relationship to the aforementioned and no longer extant Baile Siar, or western village. These and other lost coastlines are frequently cited by inhabitants of the islands as examples of what might be lost in the future, or as stoic reminders that climate change or no climate change, the islands have always been characterised by shifting and unpredictable coastal morphology, and the inhabitants of the islands have already proven resilient to such changes.

The linguistic heritage of Gaelic also surfaces in the ways in which people make sense of the increasingly unpredictable weather patterns of the island climate, with its rich vocabulary for describing the weather. In April 2021, Uist was covered under a blanket of snow. Now unaccustomed to this, islanders were abuzz with discussion about the unexpected snow in the spring – was this an extreme weather event, a sign of things to come? On twitter, the following exchange occurred:

User 1: Sneachd bheag nan uain - 'little snow of the lambs' - snow at this time of year is so common it has a name in Gaelic.
User 2: Was so common.
User 3: Na diochuimhnich sneachda na cuthaige! [Translation: Don’t forget the snow of the cuckoo!]
As with prophecy, Gaelic phrases are used to contextualise unexpected events. Common reactions to unusual weather or natural phenomena among the population of the islands tend toward hyperbole: I was told by multiple acquaintances that I was living through the worst winter they had ever had, the coldest May, the greatest abundance of midges. So it was with the 2021 April snow – however as pointed out by Gaelic tradition, this was not unusual at all. Crucially, as User 2's laconic reply reminds us, it was common, but is not anymore. The Gaelic phrases lambing snow and cuckoo snow remind us that the climate has already changed, so much so that vocabulary for describing common weather patterns has passed out of use and into a curio to be wheeled out periodically on social media. As Crouse (2021) points out, in line with much discourse surrounding indigenous language loss and its environmental effects, “this information is not only relevant to fully understanding the crises we face; they may also point to a way out of them.” In this way, the Gaelic tradition has both its own political modes of predicting and producing desirable futures, and also resources for surviving the uncertainties of an increasingly unpredictable world.

**Predictive Texts**

Having provided an overview of the resources available from the Gaelic tradition for conceptualising prediction as political action and looking to oral tradition as means to navigate uncertain climate futures, I now turn to the ways that prediction appears in everyday life. There are two core predictive texts that I will consider here. One is Climate Central’s Coastal Risk Screening Tool. This is an interactive map which allows the reader to see likely water levels in a given area in a chosen year according to a sliding scale of risk: a choice from bad, medium and good luck and with four levels of continued pollution of the atmosphere ranging from unchecked pollution, current trajectory, moderate cuts, deep and rapid cuts, and sweeping cuts now. The other text is *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community: A Comprehensive Sociolinguistic Survey of Scottish Gaelic* [hereafter *The Gaelic Crisis*]. This was a study carried out by the University of the Highlands and Islands’ Islands Gaelic Research Project (IGRP) group. For a number of reasons, discussed previously, *The Gaelic Crisis*, published in the summer of 2020, sent shockwaves through the Gaelic-speaking world. The main reason, and the one under discussion in this chapter, is the book’s core assertion that at its current trajectory Gaelic will be functionally dead as a community
language within ten years. Both of these texts – one placing Gaelic as a soon-to-be-dead language, and one placing much of the contemporary Gaelic heartland under water – recurred again and again in different contexts and conversations. These are by no means the only predictive texts that structure experience and discourses of the future in Uist, but two that generated the most discussion in the course of my fieldwork. Both texts are also questionable in terms of their accuracy. The Gaelic Crisis’s methodology has come under high levels of scrutiny by many sociolinguists (e.g. Nance, 2022) and the Climate Central tool is itself a generalised simplification of sea level rise without taking into account local variations. What interests me here, however, is not the accuracy of such models or their statistical methodologies, but rather the work that their predictions are made to do.

There is another form of predictive text that will provide an entry point into a discussion of the textuality of Uist futures on a more quotidian level: the weather forecast. As in much of the UK, but particularly in the weather-beaten Western Isles, the weather forecast is a lynchpin of conversation and the planning of daily activity. A discussion of textual futures in Uist would therefore be incomplete without a mention of this most ubiquitous cultural artefact. It also provides a daily example of the ways in which particular predictive texts come to permeate the lives and mindsets of people in the islands.

As I have said, predictions about the future in Uist, whether for the Gaelic language or the natural environment, are to a large extent mediated through texts. That is, on the obvious level, the dissemination of information about these predictions is primarily a textual affair, though documents of various kinds. However it is also the case that the lived experience of looking into the future is also mediated through texts and textual metaphors – the experience of short term futures is inextricable from textual representations of those futures. The textuality of the ways in which we oriented ourselves to the future in Uist is well illustrated in an exchange I had with a friend about selecting the best weather conditions for sailing. The best wind range for sailing, he said, was “in the greens.” A few moments later he realised this was a potentially obscure phrasing to the uninitiated and offered an explanation. I had been living in the islands for a year at this point, so no explanation was needed – I had myself already been living my life according to the same colour-coded windspeed framework. It refers to a particular weather forecast service called
XC Weather. This is the preferred weather forecast for most islanders because it provides a localised forecast which is at least slightly more accurate than mainstream national forecasts. In XC Weather, wind speeds are grouped into colour-coded ranges to enable quick reading. The “greens” are wind speeds between thirteen and nineteen miles per hour, and this was the range favoured by my interlocutor for sailing on his small boat.

In other words, the best winds for sailing are not expressed in terms of a feeling, or by observing the skies for signs of changing weather, or even the wind speed numerical values themselves, but through a particular textual mediation. Indeed the most natural way to express the expected suitability of the following day’s weather was in the terms set by the visual conventions of a preferred weather service. The weather of the present moment then travels through a number of semiotic transformations before it re-enters as future weather. Present and past weather is transformed into numerical data, fed into a model for prediction on a numerical level, which is then re-expressed according to a colour spectrum, where it enters everyday parlance and we say that the best weather for sailing is in the greens, while the light blues provide the best prognosis for an enjoyable day’s cycling. The textual predictions produced by XC Weather then are not mere representations which we read for informational content to define our behaviour - I do not merely read the expected wind speed and decide whether I will or will not go cycling the next day - but they structure the very way we express our experience of that weather in real time. In this way we can see how the genres and forms of writing predictions for future events are influential not only in that we can use a prognostication to assess likely future events associated with one or other courses of action, but they also impact in more fundamental ways the way we think about those events. In what follows, I extend this idea to larger scale forecasts that predict broader environmental and linguistic shifts. I discuss the ways in which forms of textual prediction interplay with my interlocutors’ personal experiences, and situate this within the context of contemporary environmental and linguistic politics.

The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community

We have seen that political prediction has taken various forms in the Gaelic tradition. The prophecies of the Brahan Seer, Coinneach Odhar, date back centuries but provide resources
for making sense of the present and future, as do a variety of pieces of local lore about the landscape and pieces of widely forgotten Gaelic weather vocabulary. However prediction and prophecy are modes of speech that do not belong solely to the past and the traditional register. I turn here to a contemporary Gaelic work of prophecy. *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (Ó Giollogáin et al., 2020) is a “comprehensive sociolinguistic survey of Scottish Gaelic” released in early summer 2020. It was produced by the Islands Gaelic Research Project, a team assembled by a multi-institutional research institute called Soillse. It was designed as a “baseline study” of the health of Gaelic as a community language in the Western Isles, Staffin in Skye, and Tiree and to “assess the prospects for Gaelic as a vernacular and as a lived identity, and determine the context for language-policy interventions” (2020: 1). It is thus a work of data-collection on the present state of things, but also a predictive work, as well as an intervention on the basis of those predictions. The core prediction of the book comes in its conclusion:

Given the extent of the evidence in this publication concerning the extreme fragility of vernacular Gaelic, we can conclude that the remaining vernacular networks will not survive anywhere to any appreciable extent, under current circumstances, beyond this decade.

This trajectory means that Gaelic will soon cease to exist as a community language anywhere in Scotland.

(ibid.: 442).

Throughout the book, Gaelic is discussed as being on a particular “trajectory”, at “an advanced point on the timeline” (ibid.: 5) of decline, or in “the critical contraction phase of the societal vitality” (ibid.: 15). Following Heller and Duchêne’s (2008) analysis of language death studies, these kinds of predictions operate by constructing language as an object which has a knowable set of rules for its behaviour, and its fate can be divined by understanding what these rules might be. In this case, the rules are expressed in the form of statistical analysis and graphically represented in the below model. Gaelic is described as having a “lifecycle” (Ó Giollogáin et al., 2020: 69). The stages in which a language might pass are variously categorised as “residual, interstitial and moribund” (ibid.: 64). The study’s
model plots these three stages of language decline spatially, such that one can chart and predict the progress of Gaelic’s decline by plotting particular known variables on the graph.

The analysis that comes alongside the model does just this: it correlates census data on the percentage of family household Gaelic usage with the percentage of the population with Gaelic ability. The variables are said to be strongly correlative and, as such, “it is clear that one side of the relation can be used with confidence to predict the other” (ibid.: 67). In the discussion that follows, it is pointed out that, following the linear trend on the graph, the point at which it intersects the X axis (meaning that the number of Gaelic-speaking households is zero) is the point at which Gaelic-speaking ability in the area is 26.1%. That is, as the study puts it, “when the proportion of those with Gaelic ability in a specific district falls to a quarter or less of the population, Family Household use ceases” (ibid.: 67). The projection was that the entire research area as a whole (but only 10 out of the 25 study districts individually), is “projected to be in the Moribund set by 2021” (ibid.: 77). In doing
this, it constructs language as an object which may be said to follow a predictable timeline which is divinable through statistical analysis. It thus makes predictions on the basis of a technoscientific claim. Some of these prognoses may shortly be tested: for instance, table 2.13 on page 71 uses Gaelic census data from previous censuses to project the level of Gaelic ability in 2021. Once the current census data is released, this can be verified.

However, the verification of the truth value of these claims is not, I think, the point of these predictive models. Unlike the ostensibly apolitical technocratic predictions on Taddei’s climate modelling, the *Gaelic Crisis* is an explicitly political, even polemic, work of prediction:

In a broader context, the Celtic language in general have all been subjected to thorough-going and long-established planned initiatives by the homogenising and centralising states which have sought to elaborate and formalise their internal and external power structures with which the non-dominant ethnolinguistic groups were induced or coerced to conform. In this sense, the current (highly-)threatened condition of the Celtic languages is the result of centuries of highly-effective majoritarian language planning.

(ibid.: 23).

The strengthening of British ascription or identity and weakening of identity as a Gael was, of course, a longstanding policy of the British state.

(ibid.: 210).

There has been significant backlash in the Gaelic linguistic academic world, attacking both the ideological and empirical underpinning of the work (see for example Nance, 2022; MacLeod et al., 2022). This forms part of the debate on indigeneity explored in Chapter Six. The problems hinge on both problems of data interpretation and analysis, as well as the terminological slipperiness with which the authors of the *Gaelic Crisis* represent Gaels and the “Gaelic community”. There is also a criticism of the “sensationalist” framing of the issues facing the Gaelic language, citing “a clear risk that negative framing of this kind can demoralise speakers and lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of language abandonment and non-transmission” (MacLeod et al., 2022: 87).
However, it is my contention that the specific truth claims of the *Gaelic Crisis*’s predictive models – i.e., will vernacular Gaelic in fact be extinct by the end of the decade? – are not necessarily the core of what is at stake here, either for the IGRP, their critics, or the Gaelic speaking world more generally. These predictions are not made with the expectation that they will come to pass. They are made in a polemic or “sensationalistic” style with the express purpose of proving themselves wrong by inspiring remedial social action: “a phase of societal erasure can be projected for Gaelic in its remaining historical habitat if current trends continue” (ibid.: 2020). This strong language is continued elsewhere, as “the remaining Gaelic vernacular areas will move closer to, or pass, a point of societal collapse” by 2021 (ibid.: 77). This is of course contingent on current language policy remaining the same, rather than following the “radical remedial policies” set out by the book. On the other hand, critics of the book argue that the predictions may produce the opposite effect, that they may demoralise Gaelic speakers to the point of giving up, that the *Gaelic Crisis* may become a “self-fulfilling prophecy”. Inherent in both of these approaches is an understanding of the generative power of a predictive text: a prediction can function to either self-fulfil by producing an emotional atmosphere of despair and inaction, or it can have the opposite effect in aspiring to prove itself wrong by producing the opposite emotional state in the target community and spurring remedial action. For the critics of the *Gaelic Crisis*, people who make predictions therefore must be aware of the power their predictions have to construct the world that they predict.

The prediction of Gaelic’s doom in *The Gaelic Crisis* falls within the tradition described by Newton of a prophecy which serves to galvanise support for a particular cause, and to make sense of problems faced by the Gaelic community. This is done in a literary convention more familiar to a 21st century audience than a classical prophecy: that of the statistical model. Both of the prophecies of Coinneach Odhar and those of the IGRP come from places which to most people are at least to some degree obscure. They both also have truth value from the perspective of their contemporary publics. The Brahan Seer derived legitimacy from the otherworld, while the *Gaelic Crisis* finds its authority in a language of scientific objectivity. The model’s prediction finds its way eventually into the refined form of the pronouncement
in the book’s conclusion that Gaelic would be dead in the community by the end of the decade, which has then circulated throughout the Gaelic-speaking world ever since.

**The Gaelic Crisis and Climate Change**

*The Gaelic Crisis* may have been subject to significant criticism but it has also been successful as a spur to action within certain corners of the Gaelic community. One organisation which has been vocal in its support of the findings of the study is Misneachd, a Gaelic activist group whose name means Confidence, describes the report as providing “accurate and compelling evidence that the Gaelic language and its communities are at crisis point” (Misneachd, 2021a: 5). The Gaelic Crisis’s predictions loom large in Misneachd’s publications, and form much of the evidentiary base of their activism. What follows is a discussion of an event in the following year, part of a series of online events focusing on the challenges facing the Gaelic community in the aftermath of the *Gaelic Crisis*’s publication. This particular event places the sociolinguistic challenges of the Gàidhealtachd alongside the environmental threats posed by climate change. These words were spoken at the event in April 2021 discussing the relationship between climate change and Gaelic entitled *Atharrachadh na Gnàth-shìde: Dìon na h-àrainneachdònàdarrà agus culturaich [Climate Change: Protecting the natural and cultural environment]* 21:

“Chanamaid gur iad an aon adhbhran a tha ag adhbhrachadh call chànain, ag adhbhrachadh call iomadach nàdair, a tha ag adhbhrachadh call na h-àrainneachd, atharrachadh na gnàth-shìde. ’S e siostaman eaconomaigeach nach eil cothromach a tha ag adhbhrachadh seo...mura bi an talamh ann, mura bi na taighean ’s na bailtean ann, gu dearbh cha bhi coimhearsnachdan ann, cha bhi a’ Ghàidhlig ann nas motha.”

[“We would say that it’s the same thing causing loss of language, loss of biodiversity, loss of environment, and climate change. It’s unequal economic systems that cause this...if there is no land, if there are no houses and towns, indeed there will be no communities, and there will be no Gaelic either.”]

21 Now available to watch on YouTube (Misneachd, 2021b); translations my own.
Following the opening talk in which these words were spoken, Misneachd hosted one person living in North Uist and one in South Uist to discuss the impacts of climate change on the islands and efforts being made to mitigate these effects, both physically and culturally. The event organiser spoke the words quoted above while referring to a particular set of predictions which I will come across time and time again in conversations with people in my fieldwork: the Climate Central Coastal Risk Screening Tool. The presenter shows us this future map of Uist in 50 years after presenting cartographic representations of the geographic retreat of Gaelic from a relatively large area to its current concentration in the same regions at risk of coastal flooding. Both Gaelic and the natural environment, in this rendering, are threatened by the same forces, and their fates are very much entangled in one another. With the predicted loss of land to anthropogenic climate change, an attendant loss of the Gaelic language will follow. This highlights the topic under discussion here – the twin doomsday predictions facing the islands’ natural environment and their cultural and linguistic heritage. During the presentation, direct comparisons were made between two maps, shown below in screenshots. One map shows the communities in which Gaelic is strongest today, and the other two show the same geographical area with highlights for places most at risk from climate change related flooding. The argument that the presenter makes through these two representations is that Gaelic speaking communities are those that are most vulnerable to loss of land to climate change.
Studies of Gaelic are usually quick to foreground the endangerment of the language. For example, Lamb’s (2008) study is entitled *Scottish Gaelic Speech and Writing: Register Variation in an Endangered Language*. The study is based on the rationale that in the standard trajectory of language death, a language comes to be used in fewer and fewer “registers” (e.g. social, reportage, narrative) – rather than just a contraction of vocabulary, we see a contraction of contexts in which the language might be used. Because all Gaelic speakers are bilingual, “there are almost no situations or functions for which the language is
necessary and increasingly fewer for which it is reliably chosen as a means of communication” (Lamb, 2008: 17). However, Gaelic scholar Will Lamb finds that there is still considerable evidence of usage of as many registers as are used in English. This is however a common concern in the Gaelic-speaking world, that Gaelic’s use in fewer contexts where it could be used is evidence of things to come. Gaelic medium events such as the Misneachd event on climate change take on an interesting function in light of this. One might expect that technoscientific subjects such as climate change and coastal erosion would find themselves discussed primarily in English, and this is of course usually the case: for example the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership, a climate change adaptation body, operates entirely through English. In discussing this through Gaelic, however, the Misneachd event resists a contraction of register. In doing so it adopts a complicated relationship to predictions of decline and death of Gaelic lifeways: it discusses a potential future in which the Gaelic heartlands are swallowed by the sea in the face of anthropogenic climate change, but by proclaiming this possible doom of the language in Gaelic, it also resists and rejects prophetic registers that would cast Gaelic as losing registers, contexts, and community usage. Prediction of loss on one level works to resist the fruition of prediction of that same loss on another.

This provides a further example relating to Chapter Four, in which I argued that the translation of certain environment discourses into Gaelic can help to produce a sense of value for both the language and the environment. In this case, discussions of climate change are integrated into Gaelic-medium discussions about language shift, a translation with two implications: the first is that Gaelic is a language suitable for discussions of questions of coastal resilience in the face of climate change, and the second is that climate change predictions might also be put to work within framework of Gaelic language activism. This event then combines multiple registers of predictions of loss: those within the Gaelic tradition, technoscientific discourses about climate change, and sociolinguistic statistical models of language shift.
Living with doom

Local reactions to the predictions of doom at the hands of anthropogenic climate change and language shift fall, as might be expected, along a spectrum, which I will explore in the following section. This is well illustrated by The Climate Central Coastal Risk screening tool’s appearance in a local Facebook Group in the winter of 2020 (effectively the same screenshot that was shared in the Misneachd presentation), sparking a lively debate among members of the group. The text accompanying the above map, posted by User 1 reads: “South Uist and the Western Isles may well look very different by 2050. Support action on climate change.”

Primarily, what we have is quibbling on the finer points of climate change science. The first response dismisses “the sea level rising nonsense” as “attention seeking drama”. The jovial tone of our sea level rise denier (note that they are not in fact denying climate change per se, just sea level rise) continues throughout: e.g. “don’t worry ya don’t need yer water wings.” They argue that the sea level rise that will happen has already happened, and the point of concern is extreme weather patterns. Higher tides are to be explained by lunar activity among other factors. They bring to the table an article about the fact that Scotland in general is geologically rising above sea level and England is sinking, meaning we are “more likely to need your mountain boots than yer water wings.”

The response highlights that though mainland Scotland is rising, the islands are actually sinking. Various users link to news articles, such as one about flooding in Venice, citing climate change as the cause of highest tide in 50 years. They also cite local places, for example Baleshare:

Places are already flooding Globally, Baleshare has been recorded as losing over 60 metres of coast since the late 80's. Just because you can see it, doesn't mean it isn't happening. Also the British isles are rising in some areas, however the outer edges are sinking, that along with low coast and man made changes like causeways, channels etc doesn't help...
The Dig in Paible was an freshwater loch it's now a tidal loch and Àirigh Nighean Ailean is a rocky outcrop on Paible Shore which people used to wait for the tide to suitable to walk their cattle to Heisgeir. Whatever it is it’s happening and evident. There's also a village under the sea in Baleshare, evidence of forests excavated in Lionacleit and Baleshare, even the roundhouses excavated on the shore in Baleshare have microbial evidence that they were once situated in a fresh water area.

This user provides a variety of evidence of shifts in coastline at a local scale, citing Baleshare, as well as numerous other archaeological and ecological traces found in the land- and seascapes surrounding the islands that the coast used to be quite different. This provides a further everyday example of the ways in which people mobilise local knowledge and oral tradition to make sense of uncertain futures, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Throughout the debate, other texts make their way into the discussions besides the Climate Central tool itself, while the texts themselves are problematised. Various users provide citations, such as User 3’s BBC article about climate change-related flooding in Venice, which is posted without comment – the text speaks for itself. User 2 posts an article to show that Scotland is rising above sea level, geologically speaking, while User 1 provides evidence for ice cap melting producing continued changes to global weather patterns. User 2’s arguments are in fact largely about the interpretation of particular texts and entextualisations: “lazy reporting puts it down to one thing and that’s just not the thing”. For User 2, then, the problem is that the issue is more complex than climate change, and the expression of sea level change in terms of millimetres is problematically simplified. “Lazy reporting” returns later on with the question: “do they think we wouldn’t understand a complex in depth report.” This then brings in the issue of scientific literacy, and a sense that “we”, which can be inferred to mean islanders, are not considered capable of interpreting texts, thereby vulnerable to misinformation at the hands of those who create “attention seeking drama”. We can see then how people make self-conscious use of different forms of texts which adopt varying stances toward predictions. They critique these texts, their

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22 For context, this is no longer possible because of rising sea levels and Heisgeir is only accessible by boat.
veracity and their social context – seeing them as creating drama or adopting a patronizing view of their readership.

These forum users themselves produce a collaborative text in which the need for action is debated on the basis of a predictive model. One commenter hopes to encourage people “to support action on climate change”, while another seems to oppose the need for such action. Others chimes in with a sardonic comment, such as one about persuading islanders to ditch their all-terrain vehicles, which taps into environmental justice issues of the inapplicability of mainstream anti-car climate discourse to rural areas. They also call for government support and points out that immersion of land will require infrastructural investment in the form of more causeways (although many people told me that the causeways themselves have increased the vulnerability of coastal areas to flooding by altering natural water flow corridors). What emerges from this crowd-sourced document is a snapshot of the various ways in which people navigate predictions of their impending inundation, how they engage with the veracity of those predictions, and how they see themselves and others as implicated in mitigating or adapting to their coming-to-pass.

On top of the production of informal documents such as this one, islanders are well aware of their propensity to appear in formal text-making practices of various kinds. The BBC (BBC 2020) produced a short video report on the impact of climate change on the islands, and particularly on the loss of crofting land to erosion in the wake of more extreme weather and rising sea levels. The video tells us that “rising sea levels and powerful storms are eroding the dunes and machair land that protects many low-lying communities” and is based largely on an interview with a crofter whose “land is slowly being consumed by the sea.” The language here is emotive and has a sense of inevitability, of dread. During the filming of this segment, I was spending time with an islander who has worked for the BBC herself over the years and we bumped into the production crew, who she knew. They chatted a little about who was to be interviewed for the piece, and then we went on our way. As we left, my companion wryly said to me “obviously I couldn’t tell him about the house I’m building right by the water.” This particular house is in a location with decent coastal defences but is nearby a loch that is increasingly prone to flooding. Climate Central’s Coastal Risk Screening Tool places that particular district as below the annual flood level by 2040. Being below the
“annual flood level” means that “the water level at the shoreline that local coastal floods exceed on average once per year. In other words, ten floods are statistically expected to exceed this level over ten years, although some years might have two or more incidents, and other years none” (Climate Central, N.D.).

My companion that day was well aware of the ways in which her story fell into narratives of vulnerable islands and had no desire to find herself and her house thrust into the doomsday discourse. Of course, as noted previously, the Climate Central map is not sensitive to local conditions, and the particular patch of land on which this house has now been built was judged to be relatively safe for the area. As it happens, looking at the segment that was produced in the end, it is unclear whether my interlocutor would have made it in. The story here was about inevitability, about the expectation of losing one’s home. It was not about the possibility of building a new home in the face of uncertainty, or of resilience and sanguinity in the face of predicted disaster.

I first found out about this screening tool at a party in the same part of the island where the new house in question is being built. The conversation had turned to climate change, and our host for the evening was telling us how the rental property in which we stood drinking wine and eating snacks while Storm Ciara raged outside would likely be underwater in 20 years. In this conversation, the same map cited in the Misneachd climate change event is cited, and this is the first time of many I come across this same predictive text. Living in an area that is vulnerable to the effects of climate change is full of these moments: in the midst of an extreme weather event we contemplate the imminent inundation of the land on which we stand, and conversations with journalists are carefully managed to avoid becoming a segment on the news. In a house rented by people who are likely transient in the place, it is one thing to sit and ruminate over the impending flood in a place where we have no roots, to imagine with horror the loss of a place where we have fond memories but ultimately no investment. For my house-building interlocutor it is a different question – this is the place she grew up and the place to which she has returned to stay after years on the mainland. To dwell on the possibility of its disappearance and build a life elsewhere is to accept one’s fate. Building a new house on the family croft perhaps represents a form of defiance against this theme of the community’s prophesised doom at the hands of coastal
erosion. I can feel wistful in a detached way about this, but for others, who wish to stay permanently and maintain the community, another affective register towards the future is required for survival.

On the Gaelic side, surprisingly few people I asked seemed to have found their hopes crushed by the IGRP study. On the contrary, some people I knew in the islands did find it to be a sort of call to arms. One person, engaged in public conversations about Gaelic, expressed frustration at the seeming lack of engagement with the study from the Gaelic establishment, and many were vocal at community consultations I attended on the necessary next steps in Gaelic revitalisation. The public response to the study was in fact largely categorised by various forms of denial: people I knew had major disagreements and fallings-out with friends because of the study, and rumours circulated about participants in the study giving deliberately misleading or confounding information to the researchers, thus undermining the truthfulness of their claims. Indeed, for many there is a sense of stifling of debate, in that those who point out problems are accused of being unduly negative and warned of the dangers of negative discourse surrounding Gaelic: if we pronounce the language dying, then we can bring its death into being. For those of older generations, who grew up in a more strongly anti-Gaelic world than we see today, this is perhaps understandable. They grew up with a strong sense of inferiority: many of my older interlocutors spoke of having the Gaelic “beaten out of them” at school and being instilled with a view of Gaelic as being backward, and English the way forward. This majoritarian linguistic worldview is one of the major driving forces behind the contraction of Gaelic as a community language over the past few centuries. Following more recent developments and hard work to give Gaelic a place within the future of the nation of Scotland, a return to the narrative of “Gaelic is dying” might seem like a return to the bad old days of linguistic fatalism. For younger generations, however, facing unprecedented challenges to remain in and maintain Gaelic-speaking communities this can seem like a refusal to face up to harsh realities.

For some, the outlook of the language is decidedly bleak, and it did not take a sociolinguistic study of the vernacular community to instil a sense of doom and gloom in the Gaelic world. In my experience, many people were already living with a sense of the decline and likely
death of Gaelic and its associated lifeways. Only 34 out of 80 young people surveyed by the IGRP thought that Gaelic was likely to survive (ibid., 131), while the highest number of responses to the question of Gaelic’s status in twenty years’ time was “much weaker” (ibid., 202) – as the study’s findings themselves show, there was already a deep sense of demoralisation. Fishing, an industry with close ties to Gaelic, is similarly perceived as being threatened, on the verge of disappearance. One fisherman told me that “it’s dying out”.

Another told me of the high start-up cost of a fishing business: currently using his father’s boat, he could not afford to enter it in his own right, and even if he was able to access the funds to do so he wouldn’t consider it worth his while because of the hard nature of the work and the difficulty in paying back the loans. His future lay in wildlife tours, a common reorientation within the sector. One boat crew I fished with in my fieldwork felt somewhat more optimistic about fishing, although less so about Gaelic. Both crew members were born and raised in Uist, but neither were Gaelic-speakers. One had never spoken Gaelic, while the other had spoken only Gaelic until he went to school, at which point his home life gradually shifted to English and now he is monolingual in English. We chatted about this while filing hundreds of langoustines we had hauled up from the seafloor in creels into size classifications – small, medium, and large. He talks about how he failed to re-learn Gaelic at school, how it didn’t stick when his native language was taught back to him in a classroom. In a tone of resignation, he told me: “if a language dies, it dies for a reason.” When I asked whether he thought recent efforts at revitalisation might yield any hope, he told me that he doubted it. For someone who had experienced language shift in his personal life, I think this future orientation is understandable.

Not all perspectives put to me were as pessimistic. One fluent Gaelic learner who had worked for many years in Gaelic education and lived in the islands for decades argued that Gaelic, being a “very attractive language” is doing well – he sees its continuation, and cites its growing strength in mainland, urban Scotland, while admitting that you do not as often hear Gaelic being spoken in the local Coop supermarket – a folk measure of the strength of the language in the community that I heard many people use. If Gaelic is being spoken in the Coop, the community is strong. While I lived in South Uist, the Coop was a reliable spot to hear Gaelic spoken, while the one in Benbecula was somewhat less so. At any rate, this
source points out that the “character” of Gaelic will certainly change, with contraction in some areas and growth in others. I suspect that what he meant by “change” is precisely what is meant by “death” by the authors of the Gaelic Crisis. It is possible that they would agree on the substance of the change to Gaelic’s distribution in Scotland but with a shift in perspective on what that change means: a shift towards a more civic, institutionally based language or the death of the vernacular community.

Margaret is a fluent Gaelic-speaking crofter from the islands with experience working in the environmental sector. She has two children and a hopeful attitude. Her son has better Gaelic, she says, than her daughter, because he is more actively involved in the township’s crofting activities, which are mainly with older men and thus the linguistic medium of their activities is Gaelic. This illustrates the close connection between Gaelic and crofting, but also underlines the potential twin threat as the social setting in which Gaelic is being spoken is primarily older men with a few interested youngsters who may not stick around. Margaret is concerned that there has been a shift in her lifetime, but also refers to “the language of the shop” as her measure of the strength of the language. For her, the fact that she can go into her local grocery store and speak Gaelic with the staff tell her the community is still alive. Margaret is realistic about the threats being faced but is keen to emphasise the positive. Both of her children “live and breathe” crofting, and so she sees a future for at least their land, and for Gaelic with it, despite the worrying trends. With her background in ecology, she is passionate about the need for people to work the land to maintain the natural environment. Following a discussion of the shifting sand dunes in the context of projections of loss, she says: “We’ll still be here doing what we do.”

Similarly, John, a member of the islands’ community of biodiversity recorders, observed that:

I change day to day. I don’t know whether it’s pessimistic to say that this place is going to go underwater, I think it’s probably correct. A lot of people are avoiding the fact that it is going to, and I suppose you could be optimistic that it won’t be soon or pessimistic that it might happen in the next 5 or 10 years, I don’t know... I’m quite
sure we think sometimes what on earth are we doing this for? We might as well go and get pissed. But we do it because we enjoy it and because it's interesting.

To a large extent, this community sees itself as recording the current state of biodiversity as a baseline, and as a form of “doomsday fieldwork”, producing texts to record how Uist is now on the understanding that the species richness will soon be lost, due to various factors including but not limited to climate change. This is done in the shadow of impending predicted loss, in resistance against this loss but it is also, like crofting, like fishing, like speaking Gaelic in the Coop, done for enjoyment, for its own sake.

Conclusion

"The day will come when the jawbone of the big sheep, or 'caorich mhora,' will put the plough on the rafters (air an aradh); when sheep shall become so numerous that the bleating of the one shall be heard by the other from Conchra in Lochalsh to Bun-da-Loch in Kintail they shall be at their height in price, and henceforth will go back and deteriorate, until they disappear altogether, and be so thoroughly forgotten that a man finding the jawbone of a sheep in a cairn, will not recognise it or be able to tell what animal it belonged to. The ancient proprietors of the soil shall give place to strange merchant proprietors, and the whole Highlands will become one huge deer forest; the whole country will be so utterly desolated and depopulated that the crow of a cock shall not be heard north of Druim-Uachdair; the people will emigrate to Islands now unknown, but which shall yet be discovered in the boundless oceans, after which the deer and other wild animals in the huge wilderness shall be exterminated and drowned by horrid Black Rains (siantan dubha). The people will then return and take undisturbed possession of the lands of their ancestors."

(Mackenzie, 1888: 20).

This is one of the “unfulfilled prophecies” in Mackenzie’s collection of Coinneach Odhar’s prophecies. It bears quoting at length, I think, as an example of the changing meaning of predictions over time. In 1888, when Mackenzie collected the prophecies of the Brahan Seer, much of this seemed obscure and strange. In today’s context of frequent
pronouncements of the Western Isles’ environmental and linguistic decline is possible to see ourselves on a trajectory towards fulfilment. As crofting finds itself threatened by climatic and economic forces, it could indeed come to pass that sheep farming in the Hebrides might disappear. The “strange merchant proprietors” may have already arrived on the islands in the form of an increasing number of mobile remote workers, thanks to the now wide availability of high-speed broadband. Reforestation and rewilding are gathering pace across the Highlands. One forester told me that there was a risk that crofting forestry could allow for greater croft absenteeism (a chronic problem in crofting areas where the holder of a croft is not present and allows the land to degenerate). An absentee crofter runs the risk of having their croft reallocated, but reforesting the crofting land is considered an acceptable use – one which does not require much ongoing intervention compared to animal agriculture. Thus many of the people applying to participate in the Woodland Trust’s Croft Woodland project are absentee crofters. This runs the risk of allowing further croft depopulation while participating in nationwide climate change mitigation strategies involving the planting of trees for carbon capture – helping to fulfil prophecies about Gaelic’s disappearance while working to prevent the coming-to-pass of those about the environment. Whether the deer represent a likely key fixture in the future forests of Uist is at this point questionable – deer are the sworn enemy of the islands’ nascent woodland projects. Finally, we see reference to a mass extinction due to some kind of extreme weather event, which eventually leads to the reinstitution of the Gaels upon the land.

Folklorists have preserved this prophecy in what is likely a modified form, passing through various transformations via oral tradition, interview, transcription, editing, publishing, and here, citation. These modified futures are then available, like the prediction about greylag geese and Englishmen, to recirculate into orality and structure our experience of Uist’s future. Contemporary predictions in primarily textual scientific genres operate in similar ways: those predicting sea level rise and coastal erosion, or the death of a language, start in the collection of data about geomorphology and meteorology, or interviews with teenagers about their feelings toward the language they speak (or not). They then feed through disciplinary practices of rephrasing, and are re-presented to the inhabitants of the islands in the form of a prediction. These representations then circulate back out of texts and play their part in the generation of futures in the islands – they engender debate in some cases,
find their way into policy by influencing public consultations, they inspire biological recording which can then be used as evidence to protect wildlife, or simply form a backdrop for people living their lives in spite of them, resisting their fruition by still being here “doing what we do.” Predictions of doom may prove self-fulfilling prophecies, turn out to be “attention-seeking drama”, or provide spaces for political action in order to prove themselves wrong.

Predictions of doom have formed a core aspect of the textual and oral cultures of Gaelic for hundreds of years. The islands, as a stronghold of the language, have similarly long been described in a tone of what Choy (2011) describes as “anticipatory nostalgia” – last bastion of a disappearing heritage. In recent years, the Gaelic apocalypse has been joined by a new end-of-days for islanders, this time emerging from anthropogenic climate change. Where previously Gaelic was threatened by language shift in the context of socioeconomic change and the biodiversity of the machair was similarly threatened by the accompanying agroecological shifts, both are now threatened by increasingly unstable weather conditions and rising sea levels. That Gaelic and climate forecasting come together in the Misneachd event is an interesting development for the purposes of integrating Gaelic revitalisation and the conservation of nature. In this event there is a moment in which the two spheres find genuine use for each other in clear ways, through the translation of climate change science into Gaelic and its discussion in a public forum, integrating traditional knowledge, the Gaelic Crisis, itself a statistical continuation of a genre of doomsday prediction, and climate modelling into a form of prediction that seeks to prevent its own coming-to-pass. Climate change predictions are thus easily integrated into an existing tradition of Gaelic discourse.

It might be said then that Misneachd are using climate data infrastructures as infrastructures for linguistic preservation. It is a response, of course, to the very real threat of climate change in the low-lying land in Gaelic speaking communities. It represents a potential shift in consciousness, and one that lights the way towards ways in which Gaelic speaking communities might be more active participants in the production and maintenance of climate infrastructures. It is also a pragmatic move: faced by continual neglect of Gaelic communities, Misneachd perhaps see an opportunity to latch on to a cause about which people do seem to care, namely climate change. Whatever their motivations, having an
increasingly environmentalist Gaelic voice in the conversation creates a space through which climate infrastructure planning might make meaningful use of the considerable socioenvironmental resources available to the Gaels, both for the preservation of both Gaelic language and culture and the natural environments of the islands. In this sense, looking to predictions of loss, a seemingly hopeless genre of speech and writing, there can be seen a glimmer of hope for genuine collaboration between the preservation of Uist’s natural and cultural heritage.
Conclusion
Whose mess is it, anyway?

January 2020 was a particularly stormy month for the islands and in the aftermath of Storm Brendan, there was widespread public concern for the vast amounts of plastic washed up on the beaches. Marine litter was a common sight on the shoreline, but the consensus among pretty much everyone I spoke to in the islands is that this is worse than it had been before. February saw a mobilisation of many community groups throughout the islands to remove plastic from the beaches. In South Uist, Stòras Uibhist had organised community beach cleans at three sites along the coast, identified as the most severely affected.

It was a grey Friday morning at the beginning of February 2020 and I was standing shin-deep in a pile of seaweed washed up on the Kildonan beach, a townland on the west coast of South Uist. I had a black plastic bag in one hand and a litter picker in the other. The black seaweed was speckled with a multicoloured array of bottle caps, shotgun shells, and other variably identifiable plastic objects. Tangled up in the seaweed were lengths of rope, ranging in length from a few centimetres to several metres. There were also sheets of plastic wrapping, the kind used to wrap hay bales or pallets of boxes for delivery, which twist themselves into long, strong ropes that are difficult to extract from sand or seaweed. Removing these was like pulling weeds: if you were not careful you can snap the stem and leave the roots behind. Maybe 200 metres away from us, some crofters were on the same beach with a tractor. They were collecting seaweed from another pile (one less afflicted with plastic pollution than this one) in order to spread it on the thin, sandy soil of the machair as fertiliser.

One of my co-pickers was quizzing me about why I had chosen to base my PhD research, which I then conceived as being primarily about wildlife management and conflicting meanings of nature, in Uist. I point to the crofters and ourselves and asked her where else would you find such diverging approaches to washed-up seaweed in such close proximity. To this she snorts bitterly, and gesturing to the crofters, says: “We’re cleaning up their mess.” This was not a particularly surprising utterance: crofters are not known for their
tidiness when it comes to management of the land, and this tendency towards messiness is at odds with the wilderness aesthetics of many who move to the islands seeking pristine, uninterrupted views. It was, then, not a shock to hear the responsibility for marine plastic waste being shifted onto the crofting community.

But who are we? And who are they? What exactly is the “mess” in question? Whose mess is it, anyway?

This thesis has explored these questions through six interconnected essays, each of which is organised around a central theme: community, nature, writing, naming/ translating, belonging, and predicting. Each theme provided an open conceptual space I which I juxtaposed the respective problems of preserving nature on the one hand and Gaelic language and culture on the other. Through an analysis-by-juxtaposition, I explored the correspondences between environmental and cultural decline in contemporary Scotland, and considered what it means to adjust to these losses and to clear up the mess that has been left behind.

In chapter 1, I opened with an interrogation of one of the foundational building blocks of current policy interventions into rural areas in Scotland: the notion of the “community”. This community concept is increasingly deployed as an antidote to the oppressive, top-down nature of governance in Scotland, and is central to the Scottish government’s efforts to address the social problems emerging from the country’s long history of resource concentration. This issue is at the core of debates around the sustainability of Gaelic culture as well as environmental justice, both centring on the distribution of, and access to, land. The concept of community is plagued by its terminological slipperiness and the ease with which it can be co-opted by powerful interests at ground level when it is deployed as a corrective to inequities. In Uist, the concept struggles to overcome the contradiction between a need for inclusivity of all groups and a need for the correction of power imbalances between those groups. The egalitarian, multicultural openness of community governance paradigms turns out to be ill-equipped to handle the messiness of the encounter between Gaelic-speaking communities and “incomers” who come from backgrounds that the former group perceive as their historical oppressor. The community
that needs to exist in order for this paradigm to function in many ways maps poorly onto the multiple communities of the islands. Moreover community governance is still, as I have shown, embedded within epistemological frameworks which marginalise and alienate islanders if they do not conform to an ideal type of environmentally sustainable subjectivity.

In chapter 2 I applied these insights to efforts to produce a particular form of nature through practices of land management. Here I examined both top-down state initiatives (AECS) and problems of land management at the community level, focusing on the efforts of the South Uist Estate to foster a sense of environmental integration after the community buyout. I argued that the crofting system, which those in power initially developed as a means to produce cheap labour, is now considered by the inheritors of that power as a generator of environmental capital in the form of biodiversity enhancement and carbon storage. Crofting is also, in the context of land reform, imagined as being a means through which a particular utopian form of egalitarian, cooperative, and environmentally sustainable community might be brought into being. Much like the problems outlined in chapter one, where ideals of community do not map neatly onto realities on the ground, these ideas about crofters as producing new forms of nature and culture are at odds with the self-understanding of many living and working in the islands today. While contemporary theoretical understandings of nature tend to stress the integration of nature with culture, I argued that the nature-culture binary is alive and well in Scotland. This causes problems for cooperation between the preservation of cultural and natural heritage where the natural is afforded a preferential status.

Taken together, these two chapters demonstrate the ways in which the core ideas underpinning environmental governance, and the ways in which they are produced and operationalised, perpetuate frameworks of thought that marginalise Gaelic speaking people. Placing Gaelic and nature conservation alongside one another within the narrative frameworks of community governance and environmental management contributes an understanding of how the legacy and continuation of historical inequities experienced by the Gaelic community present a challenge to the achievement of the community governance paradigm’s ultimate aims. In chapters 3 and 4, I turn to the particular
epistemologies in question here by focusing on linguistic practices of writing, naming, and translating.

In chapter 3, I move on to the practice of writing as a means to preserve the world. Creating detailed written records has long been a central practice in both the preservation of Gaelic culture and the conservation of nature. This proceeds in a relatively unproblematic way as regards nature conservation in Britain, which is well established as a scribal practice, and the efficacy of regular record-making is universally accepted as a cornerstone of conservation. In the Gaelic context, however, literacy and the written word have a more uneasy resonance. Commonly described as a primarily oral language, Gaelic does in fact have a long and rich literary tradition. However, many fluent speakers today are functionally illiterate in the language. An emphasis on the language’s orality is related to notions of its endangerment and vulnerability, and there is a level of ambivalence within the Gaelic speaking world toward the usefulness of written texts to preserve the language accurately. While I also show that there are ways in which orality has a place within nature conservation and textuality within the Gaelic world, the broadly contrasting relationship with the textual is not without practical consequence. Regular record-making of species abundance allows nature enthusiasts to speak the textual language of the state, produces something that can be easily understood as “evidence”, and allows access to the considerable world-making power of the written word. Meanwhile, the Gaelic world lacks a quotidian literacy culture in the same way and, as a consequence, does not produce a comparable textual version of itself.

Chapter 4 continues the consideration of textuality and asks: what happens to the species concept when it travels across linguistic boundaries, as well as what happens to the languages themselves as it does so? Drawing on ideas about taxonomy and translation as world-making practice, this chapter takes a number of texts and practices into account in which the species concept is deployed. In the juxtaposition of spaces in which speciation appears in English, Latin, and Gaelic, what emerges is a hierarchy of languages. Linnaean taxonomy is considered to be the gold standard of accurate representation of the natural world. Meanwhile Gaelic is used primarily for aesthetic value. Here I bring in the idea that the use of a particular language to express certain kinds of information has impacts not only
for the information expressed but also on the language itself. That is, if Gaelic can be used as a credible means to express technoscientific information, then this has significant implications for its place in the Scottish modernity. I examined different texts in which Gaelic interacts with species taxonomy to show how some writers have attempted to generate value for the language by translating taxonomy into Gaelic, and how in practice Gaelic is deployed in a way that betrays wider attitudes about its suitability for precise representation.

Where chapters 1 and 2 showed that nature conservation operates based on governance concepts that do not match easily with Gaelic culture, chapters 3 and 4 dug into the epistemological and linguistic foundations of this mismatch. Writing, taxonomising, and translating have significant impacts on the ways in which the world is perceived and processed, and a focus on these language practices has proven an effective lens to perceive some of the tensions involved in building a world with space for both biological and linguistic diversity in contemporary Scotland. Where nature conservation easily speaks the language of government in its everyday data production, Gaelic revitalisation does not. While the Gaelic world regards textuality with some ambivalence, the textual cultures of nature conservation also hold Gaelic in a subordinate position – thus there is a mutual scepticism about the written word and the Gaelic language as means to accurately represent the world. These chapters contribute to the anthropology of language, demonstrating the ways in which linguistic operations make the world, but crucially they remind us that it matters which language is under discussion: different languages have varying capacities for worldbuilding, and the languages themselves are also shaped through these processes, which are not one-way transformations.

The thesis then turns to the interrogation of particular discursive strategies which integrate both the figures of community and nature and the linguistic strategies of writing, taxonomising, and translating. Each of chapters 5 and 6 examines a type of argument about the islands’ socioecological futures and compares its relative efficacy for protecting an endangered entity. Both provide case studies in potential integration of cultural and natural arguments in preserving a certain vision of the islands, offering in chapter 5 a less successful example and in chapter 6 a glimmer of hope.
Chapter 5 explores what I call discourses of belonging: narratives of indigeneity and invasiveness. Through these ideas which often operate as structural metaphors for each other, residents of the islands negotiate and contest the question of who and what belongs in the islands. This chapter contributes to social-scientific debates about the relationships between invasive species rhetoric and the politics of belonging in (post)colonial states, offering an example of how these connections operate closer to the centres of empire. Frameworks of biological invasiveness are at times highly effective at mobilising conservation efforts aimed to protecting wildlife that is considered indigenous to the islands from non-native invasive spaces. However they falter somewhat where the designation of a particular species as invasive to island ecologies conflicts with their nativeness to the nation of the United Kingdom as a whole. Meanwhile, Gaelic-speakers increasingly claim indigeneity as a form of ethnic identity which aims similarly to protect those indigenous to the area from external threats, including house prices which are driven higher by mainlanders moving to the islands. Similarly to the hedgehog as an invasive species, this discourse, which emphasises the fractured nature of British identities, finds little purchase. As a strategy for the protection of natural and cultural heritage, then, frameworks of indigeneity and invasiveness are only fully effective when they reaffirm the integrity of the United Kingdom and the islands as integral parts of that whole. Echoing chapter 2, this presents a case study in which the nature-culture binary and its continued hold on British minds might offer a partial explanation of the gap between preserving Gaelic and the natural environment in tandem: ideas about indigeneity for both human and animal islanders are on shaky conceptual ground, yet they are considered to have more objective truth value for “natural” phenomena, while cultural indigeneity exists in a separate sphere altogether.

Conversely, chapter 6 finishes with a discursive space in which there is hope for some synchronisation between efforts at preserving Gaelic and the natural environment. In this chapter I contribute to discussions about the performative powers of predictive modelling, comparing the ways in which statistical models of language death and environmental change interact within islanders’ efforts to navigate the future. I traced the role that prophecy and prediction have historically played within Gaelic political advocacy, and
situate contemporary debates in Gaelic sociolinguistics within this. Specifically, narratives of impending doom have long held a place within Gaelic politics, and it is here that contemporary language politics intersects effectively with environmental politics, specifically with relation to climate change and loss of land. Ironically, then, what concludes my thesis is the insight that hope for integrated socionatural conservation seems to emanate from spaces that proclaim a sense of hopelessness.

The “mess”, then, is the seeming incompatibility of the twin objectives of saving Gaelic and saving the islands’ natural environment. The messiness of this, I have argued, emerges from governance structures that remain stuck within frames of thought that make it difficult for genuinely mutualistic relationships between island communities and environmental management infrastructures. These frames of thought are reinforced through linguistic practices, through which the messy relationships between minoritised Gaelic speakers and the English-speaking majority play out and construct themselves. These governmental, epistemological, and linguistic problems give rise, inevitably, to messy metaphors and cognitive dissonance where such metaphors fail to fully account for the realities of island life. They give rise, in a similarly messy fashion, to a hope that emerges primarily from doom.

When I was halfway through my fieldwork in March 2021, I presented the vignette with which I opened this conclusion as part of a panel of ethnographic examples of the ways in which people felt and navigated a sense of responsibility for plastic waste. My argument was that a sense of polarisation between incomer and islander groups in Uist presented a barrier to participation of islander communities in environmental efforts such as beach cleans, which tend to be organised primarily by incomers. I pointed out that, as illustrated above, incomers tended to cast islanders as irresponsible or incompetent stewards of their ancestral environments, and that they often spoke about islanders in ways that parroted a long tradition of discourse about island communities being unable to manage resources for themselves. This in turn creates an atmosphere of exclusion at events such as these.

During the discussion following the presentations, one of my co-panellists asked me: “but aren’t the people who organise litter-picking events just doing their best to build a better
world by clearing up plastic on the beaches?” The answer to this question is of course yes, on a certain level. The question draws on a recent tradition of the “anthropology of the good” (Robbins, 2013). The aim is to undo a perceived disciplinary tendency to represent the human experience as overwhelmingly negative and defined by the “suffering subject”. Robbins exhorts anthropologists to pay attention to “the different ways people organise their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good” and to “avoid dismissing their ideals as unimportant or, worse, as bad-faith alibis for the worlds they actually create” (Robbins, 2013: 457).

In this formulation, then, what I was doing was arguing that litter-pickers were using their efforts to remove toxic pollution from the marine environment as a “bad-faith alibi” for continuing a tradition of epistemic violence against islanders. Earlier in this thesis I have levelled the same accusation against community development practitioners, who, like the litter pickers, I know to be good-intentioned, hard-working, and dedicated. As I mentioned in chapter 6, there is a school of thought within the islands that positive representations are required and negative representations reinforce problematic realities. At various points in my fieldwork I thought about committing to this mindset in my own writing: wasn’t there enough writing about the islands that foregrounded the negative and ignored all of the wonderful things about living and working there?

If I were to commit to such attentiveness to the “good”, I might tell a story about how new communities are coalescing around environmental activism in the islands. I might write about resilience. I might ignore the feelings of ethnic division behind the problems in Scottish nature conservation, too messy to be circumscribed within the liberal multiculturalism of community governance utopias. I might, in short, highlight the “good” that people are trying to bring into the world, instead of becoming mired in the murk of their unintentional exclusions. However I think this would be to do a disservice to the stories I was told and the social dynamics I observed. I do not see this as a choice to side with despair. Instead, I choose to “stay with the trouble”, in Donna Haraway’s words – rather than seeing the predicament as needing to envision either “awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures” (2016: 1), or seeking full “reconciliation or restoration”, this
entails a commitment to “the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together” (ibid., 10).

I had this conversation many times with residents of the islands, and people came down on different sides of the divide. One account that resonated most closely with my own feelings comes from a journalist, someone also concerned with the daily business of representing the islands in writing:

I don't know, I struggle on this point as a journalist because I want to know the facts and I want to put the facts out there, and I've had a struggle in recent years because we've had a depopulation problem in the Western Isles, particularly Uist actually, but I've been criticised a lot because people say I'm reinforcing the problem. That by putting out that narrative that we're shrinking, we're older, that nobody will think of this as a place to settle and repopulate. I don't accept that. My philosophy is if we don't put the facts out there before the reading public, before the policy makers, how on earth is this ever going to receive any attention? Now the same applies for the Gaelic Crisis, and I think this is the root of some of the outrage around the book: what hope for any of the initiatives out there if there's a narrative coming from us, as Gaels, that we're screwed? and I understand that and I sympathise with it, but I return to where I am as a journalist: how on earth is it ever going to happen if we're just quiet, or even worse saying everything is fine when it's not really? I've heard plenty people say this doom and gloom is no good but I think we have to be real. That's my conclusion but I have to accept that I might be in a minority. People have said to me that I create a very dark picture of these islands that I'm very, very negative and I don't accept that. I love the place, or I wouldn't be here. But it's very difficult, and I don't know the answer and I wish I did. That's often the journalist's problem, saying this isn't right, this isn't good enough, until someone turns around and says, “OK smart guy: what should we do?” And I don't know, but in my heart of hearts we have to start by recognising that there is a problem.

OK, then, smart guy: what should we do? How do we tidy up this mess? I think that we start by committing to “staying with the trouble”, and a refusing to understate the considerable
obstacles, reckoning with the messiness of lived realities. The challenge, I think, is for the environmental sector to figure out how to make itself useful for the Gaelic community. This is in contrast to existing approaches which tend to ask how Gaelic traditional ecological knowledge might be useful for nature conservation as the framework of Traditional Ecological Knowledge is increasingly considered as a fruitful possibility within the management of resources in places like Uist. This framework has a tendency towards an essentialisation and extractive instrumentalization of such knowledges (Singleton et al. 2021). It asks the question of how the cultural resources of the Gaelic community might be useful for biodiversity management or climate change mitigation (as discussed in chapter six), but it does not ask how climate change mitigation and biodiversity management might be useful for Gaelic. This is a starting point for a new discussion.
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