

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Changing politics, economics and relations on the small remote island of Fair Isle

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper interprets changes which have taken place on Fair Isle, a small remote Scottish island, over the last half century, with a focus on how the interplay of external forces and local adjustments have produced a positive working relationship between local residents, visitors and those in authority over the island. The paper discusses the changes in the island's governance and economy that the island residents have experienced and how life on the island has adjusted to major change over a fifty year period. The information and responses from resident surveys discussed were collected using identical household surveys conducted fifty years apart to provide a unique comparison on a longitudinal basis of changes in the economy and way of life on the island, including the emergence of tourism as the major driver of the economy. This has taken place without the common antagonism or problems between residents and visitors in tourist destinations, reflecting the appropriate handling of mutual interests and concerns through political arrangements which have been supportive and sympathetic to residents and visitors.

*Keywords:* change, Fair Isle, economics, islands, politics, relations, residents, tourism

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## Introduction

Greenberg and Park (1994, pp. 1, 8) comment that political ecology,

... is a historical outgrowth of the central questions asked by the social sciences about the relations between human society, viewed in its bio-cultural-political complexity, and a significantly humanized nature. It develops the common ground where various disciplines intersect ... and that the past and present relationship between policy, politics or political economy in general and the environment needs to be explicitly addressed. This directly introduces concepts of relative power at many levels of environmental and ecological analysis.

The application of political ecology in the context of tourism has not been an area of great interest to date; and yet the implications of utilising such an approach for examining relationships between often competing interests in tourism destinations has considerable potential. Nepal and Saarinen (2014), in a recent call for papers for the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, argue that,

Political ecology is greatly relevant to tourism, particularly as it relates to ecotourism, protected area tourism, indigenous peoples, and similar other nature and community-oriented travel and tourism.

Douglas (2014) suggests that it can offer a way to explore the issues relating to people, nature and power in destinations, echoing some of the ideas expressed earlier by Stonich (1998) who has examined the effects of tourism development on islands in Honduras and concluded that residents had little power with respect to environmental issues and suffered most from excessive tourism development.

In particular, others (EJOLT, 2013) have claimed that political ecology can be used to:

Inform policymakers and organizations of the complexities surrounding environment and development, thereby contributing to better environmental governance;

Understand the decisions that communities make about the natural environment in the context of their political environment, economic pressure, and societal regulations;

Look at how unequal relations in and among societies affect the natural environment, especially in context of government policy.

In this paper, a specific location is examined over a fifty year period to determine changes in the circumstances relating to policies and management applications that have controlled the ecological, social and economic environments of a small isolated island and its resident community. In this respect the study follows a similar approach to that of Beahm (2009, p. i) who noted that “Using this approach (political ecology), tourism is viewed as an instrument of development in the broader political economy.”

Small islands in particular are potentially vulnerable to external influences, policies and development, often meaning that externally generated and controlled “protection” may not always be in the best interests of local populations (Gössling, 2003; Kutting, 2010). Competition for resources between local interests and the interests of tourism or other activities can lead to conflict and to problems for the local population as Cole (2014) has demonstrated in the case of water resources. In several countries the establishment and operation of national parks and similar reserves can see the imposition of restrictions upon local traditional practices (Butler and Boyd, 2000).

Thus, the governance of many destinations unfolds as a balancing act between multiple interests of various stakeholders, often resulting in an uneasy compromise between actual or potentially conflicting interests. In those locations where tourism is dependent upon natural attributes, particularly wildlife resources, there may be competing forces for the use of those resources, both passive non-consumptive uses such as nature observation (e.g. whale watching) and active consumptive uses such as hunting or sports fishing. In addition, there may also be other interests who view such attractions as competing for other resources (for example, land, water, vegetation) or supportive of other economic activities (for example traditional hunting and fur trading). Where such conflicts of interests occur in some locations, inherited or traditional power groupings may control the nature, scale and rate of development of specific activities such as tourism, while in other areas relatively recent administrative controlling agencies, sometimes imposed by external agencies, may have control. The

development of North America is a prime example of this process, whereby the original indigenous population was not only dispossessed of its lands and resources but also relocated to unwanted areas (“reserves”) often viewed as worthless (Hall, 2010) and even the limited resources in those locations were subject to exogenous controls and regulations.

In many areas therefore, a key question is: “Control over what by whom for whose benefits?” In such situations, tourism may be viewed as a minor and relatively unimportant economic activity with little influence over decision-making and power. On the other hand, in locations where resources are limited and few, and tourism may be accepted as one of, if not the major, means of economic development, in which case other interests may be subjugated to tourism operations, which in many cases may be externally based and controlled. In the particular example discussed in this paper a number of somewhat unusual and specific circumstances have combined to produce a relatively harmonious political situation. This has resulted in a successful combination of interests maintaining mostly positive relationships both within a small community and with that community’s links with external agencies.

**Figure 1: Location of Fair Isle on a map of the British Isles.**

Source: <http://landsenduk.typepad.com/.a/6a01310f7a7ea0970c019b01077824970b-320wi>



The case examined here is that of Fair Isle, the most remote (in terms of distance from other inhabited areas) of any of the British Isles. The island lies midway between the island groups of Shetland to the north and Orkney to the south, both located north of the Scottish mainland (see [Figure 1](#)). Fair Isle is small, less than five km in length north to south, and 3 km in width. Geologically, it is part of Shetland, and experiences frequent winds with a climate that is a cool temperate maritime. To the west is the open Atlantic, to the east the North Sea, and to the north the Fair Isle Channel is an important but sometimes hazardous link between these two bodies of water. The island currently has a population of just over sixty, a figure which has remained relatively consistent for the past five decades (Butler, 1963). Like many of the outlying Scottish islands, population peaked in the mid nineteenth century (in the case of Fair Isle at over three hundred) and has declined since then (Shetland Islands Council, 2011). The

populations of both Shetland and Orkney have stabilized from around 1970 onwards primarily because of the discovery and subsequent development of oil and gas reserves in the North Sea. This development saw these two island groups serve as the landfalls for pipelines from those reserves with subsequent oil terminal development and in the case of Shetland in particular, considerable oil rig servicing development (Nelson and Butler, 1994).

The income generated by this activity has been sizeable and continuous and allowed the island authorities to improve local infrastructure for services such as education, transport and health. The private sector development of related employment opportunities and services such as accommodation, and communications has also been extensive. While Fair Isle itself has not benefited financially directly from oil and gas development funding, it has gained significant improvements in infrastructure funded by external agencies over the past forty years. These have included the provision of an airstrip and subsidized air service, improved harbour facilities for the ferry to the Shetland “mainland”, wind turbine construction to provide electricity, fire protection services, improved school facilities, and an island wide water supply. Many of these improvements have come about as a result of the Shetland Islands Council (SIC) receiving compensation payments and levies from the oil industry. As has been the case on many of the Shetland Islands, the improvement in living standards and employment opportunities from the 1970s onwards have contributed to the SIC policy of population stabilization being successful on Fair Isle (Butler, 2015).

Fair Isle was chosen as a research location in 2012/3 because of the availability of data from a survey conducted by this author in 1962/3 (Butler, 1963) and the opportunity to replicate the original survey fifty years later. The first study obtained a population survey of all households on the island and the original survey instrument was used again in 2012/3, along with additional questions relating to changes over the intervening period. As well, at the time of both surveys data were collected from the local authority (the Shetland Islands Council), from government offices in Edinburgh, archive collections in Shetland and in Edinburgh, and from The National Trust for Scotland (the owners of the island). Additional information was obtained from the annual reports of the Fair Isle Bird Observatory, the annual statistical report of the Local Authority (*Shetland in Statistics*) and from material in the George Waterston Museum on Fair Isle. As in 1962/3, all households responded fully to the second survey, and additional surveys (not discussed here) were made of visitors to the Bird Observatory. In this paper, the focus is on the governance of the island and the attitudes, responses and changes in activities of the residents, given the eventual dominance of tourism in the island economy

### **Fair Isle and tourism**

Fair Isle has an international reputation that is based on two elements; the first is the distinctive traditional Fair Isle knitting patterns that peaked in popularity in the 1930s but still retain considerable market appeal and for which demand outstrips supply (Butler, 2015); and the second is that Fair Isle is the primary location in Britain for the observation of rare and vagrant migrating birds, with the island having recorded many first records for the British Isles. The main migratory seasons are Spring and Autumn and the Fair Isle Bird Observatory (FIBO) on the island provides visitor accommodation from April to October and runs a significant bird ringing program of both migrants and nesting sea birds. This ornithological attribute attracts many visiting bird-watchers each year, numbers having increased fairly consistently over the past sixty years since the founding of the Observatory in 1948 (FIBO, 1949; 2013). Over this period tourism has become the primary economic driver of the island’s economy although few residents are employed directly in this activity. This has resulted in the transformation of the economy from the 1960s one based heavily on crofting (small scale semi-subsistence tenant farming) to the current one with multiple sources of income, indirectly dependent on tourism (Butler, 1963; 2014).

The historical development of Fair Isle over the past seven decades explains to a great degree the way that the different elements of life on the island have combined to produce a community with shared common interests and relatively little conflict during that period. The island was purchased from its previous owners in 1948 by George Waterston on his return to Britain from prisoner of war camp in Germany at the end of the Second World War (Neimann, 2012). Waterston had long wanted to open a bird observatory on Fair Isle, building on the history of bird recording on the island which had begun in the early years of the twentieth century. He established the first observatory, based in surplus Royal Navy huts, which opened in 1948 and has operated since then. It has been enlarged, rebuilt, and most recently, replaced by a completely new structure which opened in 2013. It now offers accommodation for forty eight visitors and to all intents operates as the equivalent of a three star hotel, albeit with a major scientific element in terms of the bird ringing and recording responsibilities performed by its specialised staff. A detailed review of Waterston's role is described in the book "Birds in a Cage" (Niemann, 2012), and Annual Reports of the Fair Isle Bird Observatory from 1948 to 2013 (F.I.B.O., various dates) provide a detailed record of the scientific duties of the Observatory and also invaluable commentaries on changes in, and key issues affecting the life of the island community.

An event with major implications for community stability and development on the island was the decision by Waterston to sell the island to the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) in 1954. While this occurrence had little effect upon the direct operation of the Bird Observatory, beyond some informal agreements over access to the rest of the island for bird ringing and recording purposes, it had major effects on the island community. The change in ownership, and thus control, meant that the new landlord took over responsibility for almost all the housing stock on the island, much of which needed considerable upgrading, as well as a range of other obligations. Under Crofting legislation (United Kingdom Government, 1886) a landlord has constraints on rents which can be charged and tenants have lifetime tenure which can be hereditary. This means that in modern times the income to landlords from such crofting properties is minimal and provides very limited funds for reinvestment and property upgrading. The needs of an isolated island community such as Fair Isle were far beyond the personal resources of Waterston and these were major considerations in him selling the island (Waterston, 1963). The National Trust for Scotland has been a successful landowner and has worked effectively to improve the conditions for the community since it acquired the island (Bennett, 2012; 2013). The Trust Management Plan was completed in 2009 and includes the statement that "Conservation Agreements that are empowered by the founding acts of NTS to ensure that any croft house that may be purchased by the crofter in the future will be protected by a number of measures, most importantly that it must be permanently occupied and thus contributing positively to the island's sustainability" (NTS, 2009, p. 28). One of the purposes of this agreement was to ensure that properties would not become second homes for non-residents, and that the island population would be stabilised by having permanent residents in every house on the island. Only two of the twenty four houses on the island are privately owned under previous arrangements (Bennett, 2012), and one of these is currently unoccupied and needs upgrading.

The Trust's policies have resulted in the rebuilding or substantial improvement of all of the Trust-owned houses over the half century of its ownership. In addition, it has been responsible for a number of successful applications for funding and support from the European Union and the central UK government for several major projects, including the wind turbines,

road and jetty improvements, water supply and provision of electricity. Perhaps as importantly, the NTS has been proactive in working with the Fair Isle Community Council, the Fair Isle Bird Observatory (FIBO) and the Shetland Islands Council in helping to maintain cooperation between these bodies and presenting the community viewpoint on various issues (Bennett, 2012). While over the past half century or more there has been considerable stability in the governance structure of the island, there also have been significant shifts in the power structure and influence of the various stakeholders, reflecting both external and internal shifts in policies and priorities and changing circumstances.

During the decades of the 1940s and early 1950s the population declined and dropped to under fifty people, with a likelihood of abandonment of the island (FIBO, 1959) in a similar manner to that which had occurred in other Scottish islands such as Mingulay (1912) and most famously, in 1931, St Kilda (Steel, 2011). Individual efforts and powers of persuasion prevented this, but the concerns reflected the perceived reality of the island's position, namely that little power to alter its own circumstances, economic or social, was vested in the island community. While crucially it maintained control of its own ferry boat which was based on Fair Isle, providing a permanently ready (weather permitting) means of contact with the "mainland", little else was under its own control. Agriculture was limited to the production and export of sheep, other exports were small numbers of rabbits and lobsters, and knitwear (Butler, 1963). Employment apart from agriculture was dependent mostly on Shetland Islands Council part-time work, and as with many island communities, remittances were a major source of income. Employment on the two lighthouses on the island was controlled by the Northern Lighthouse Board which employed men from off the island, and thus contributed to the island economy only through occasional work on specific projects and minor personal spending in the island shop (supplies in general for the lighthouses were obtained offshore). Electricity from the lighthouse generators was provided to the islanders' houses for lighting and implement use for a limited number of hours each day, otherwise involvement in community life was very limited (Commissioners of Northern Lighthouses, undated).

The first Bird Observatory could accommodate only twelve guests, along with a warden and family and two or three assistant wardens and other staff including a cook. The location in the north of the island, was because the first Observatory utilized formal Naval huts, and subsequent Observatory buildings have all been close to this first site. It is also very near to the pier at which the ferry boat arrives, and is over a kilometre from the nearest croft and hidden from view of all the houses. The role of the Bird Observatory and its staff in island life initially was very limited although contact with residents was high due to the constant monitoring of bird arrivals throughout the island each day. The island was "patrolled" at least twice a day by the Observatory staff, and rarities would attract everyone from the Observatory to wherever they were found, quite often in croft gardens or crops. This latter situation meant that good relations between the crofting population and those at the Bird Observatory were as essential then as they are today for the successful operation of the Observatory and the attraction of bird watching visitors.

### **Political structure**

Fair Isle is represented at the local government level, (the Shetland Islands Council), by an elected councillor responsible for Dunrossness (the southern part of the Shetland "mainland"), a position that has always been held by someone living off the island. Shetland itself has one representative, (jointly with Orkney, to the Westminster government) and (since 1999) one

member in the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. For many years the influence of the islands on government was limited to non-existent (although their military strategic value was well recognised in both World Wars). The importance of the islands changed dramatically with the discovery and subsequent development of North Sea oil and gas reserves and reflected the strategic importance of Shetland's location as the nearest landfall to some of the largest oil fields in the North Sea (Nelson and Butler, 1992). Shetland became a major base for servicing the oil rigs and supplying them with equipment, resources and particularly staff. For a brief period in the 1970s Sumburgh Airport became the fourth busiest airport in the United Kingdom, most of the flights being helicopters taking men to and from the oil rigs (Butler and Fennell, 1994). The oil terminal at Sullom Voe was the largest construction project in Europe when it was being built and over five thousand men were housed in specially built construction camps: the Shetland population at that time (1975-78) was just over seventeen thousand. Of most significance was the fact that Shetland Islands Council was able to demand and receive specific additional powers from the Westminster government relating to control over development on the seashore and for three miles off-shore. It therefore had a *de facto* veto over development and was able to secure financial benefits from the oil companies in exchange for allowing the terminal and associated infrastructure development, having determined the location, scale and operating protocols of the project (Butler, 1994). These powers, including the financial security which they provided, have generally been well-used over the following four decades, and Shetland is regarded as being a good example of how a small local government can deal with large scale international resource development and shield itself successfully from environmental, economic and social impacts (Nelson and Butler, 1994) As noted earlier, there are no direct impacts on Fair Isle from North Sea oil development, but considerable impact indirectly through the policies and investment actions of the Shetland Islands Council. The pro-active policies of the Council towards population retention and stability (SIC, 2000) have been significant in supporting similar policies of the NTS and related island initiatives as noted below, although little mention in any of the relevant policies is given to tourism.

The power structure in the post-war era has changed considerably from that in the first half of the twentieth century. The Westminster government, reflecting its involvement in the war effort, had overall control and still oversaw many operations at large, especially related to defence and maritime matters. Fair Isle, and Orkney and Shetland in particular, were of great strategic importance during the two World Wars. Scapa Flow (Orkney), fifty kilometres south of Fair Isle, was the main northern anchorage for the British fleet, and both groups of islands had several air bases, on land and for flying boats on water. Scalloway, on Shetland, was the base for the "Shetland Bus" marine link with the resistance in Norway, reflecting the relative proximity of the islands to Scandinavia and the historic links, with Shetland (and Orkney) becoming part of Scotland only in 1469. Unlike today, there was no Scottish devolution, a Scottish Office in Edinburgh oversaw development and domestic issues in Scotland. Powers at the local level were limited as control was still centralised, and there was no effective lobby from Fair Isle (or the other Shetland islands) at the local or higher levels of power. Fair Isle, like Foula, Papa Stour and the other more remote Shetland Islands have long been regarded as being on the outer fringes of Britain (the "Ultima Thule" of the Romans) and of little significance to anyone other than their inhabitants.

Such is still the case for many islands off the British coast, two other islands (St Kilda and Canna) have the NTS as their landlord, others such as Gigha and Eigg have witnessed

community buy-outs with central Scottish government assistance, and many others have a rather fragile existence with limited resources and still declining populations. Renewed popularity of Harris Tweed has helped the economy of Harris, and a resurgence of interest in Gaelic has stimulated parts of the Isle of Skye, but apart from continued crofting agriculture, along with the traditional fishing, tourism has become one of the major drivers of the economy of many of the other islands.

The current political structure in Fair Isle (and many other Scottish islands) is quite different to what it was a half century ago, both in form and in the relative importance of the actors involved. The creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 and continued devolution of powers from Westminster have meant that many more issues are now decided in Scotland than was previously the case. The Scottish Office is a shadow of its former self in terms of importance and contribution, and the central UK government has declined in relative power, while the newly created Scottish Parliament has continued to increase in influence. However, in the case of Fair Isle, it is the revitalised Shetland Islands Council, aided by its oil-generated revenues, which now has by far the greatest influence on the island. Thus improved services and a wide range of additional employment opportunities now exist on the island courtesy of the local authority. The primary school, for example, with six pupils has a staff of seven, all local authority (mostly part-time) employees, and other positions exist in terms of infrastructure maintenance, construction (e.g. of fire services), airport operations, and other positions relating to the harbour facilities at the North Haven where the Observatory is located.

### **New services and facilities**

Shetland Islands Council has been proactive in dealing with its island communities in general and Fair Isle has been no exception. Major improvements have been made to the landing jetty at the North Haven where the ferry boat is based, initially in the form of landward expansion of the dock area and creation of a slipway to remove the boat from the water in the winter, and most recently in terms of the construction of a major breakwater to provide shelter in the North Haven. It is now a recognised anchorage for visiting yachts and popular in the summer. The airstrip was constructed by British Army personnel but maintenance of the strip and associated buildings and subsidisation of Loganair (the company providing air services to Fair Isle and other outlying Shetland Islands) are done by the Council. The provision of the regular air service required the provision of fire services and thus Fair Isle now has a fire engine, a retained fire-fighting crew and a building for the fire engine. The village school and hall have been improved and modernised and the roads improved (although not to a high standard). The *Good Shepherd IV* (the latest ferry boat) is larger and can carry vehicles and its purchase was supported by the Council. The greater capacity of the boat is reflected in the number of vehicles on the few kilometres of surfaced road on Fair Isle; there were 32 vehicles in 2013, compared to one tractor and one lorry in the 1950s on the occasion of the Royal visit (FIBO, 1954). An improved water supply to all houses was completed in 1964 and the Fair Isle community instituted the first commercially-operated wind energy scheme in Europe in 1982 and now owns two wind turbines that supplement and replace (weather permitting) the diesel generators that have traditionally provided electric power. This has meant a 24 hour supply of electricity when the wind is favourable, otherwise power is turned off at 11.00pm until 6.00am except for emergency stand-by service and for the lighthouses which are now automated. There are still no permanent medical or dental services on the island, although a registered nurse is based in the community. A more permanent clinic for visiting medical services is to

be established in the village hall in the near future. The construction of a communications tower on the highest point in 1976 has provided reliable telephone and television/radio service and broadband access to computer services. The effect of the provision of these services has meant a significant improvement in the quality of life for the residents, providing more reliable and much more frequent access to and from the rest of Shetland and then the UK mainland and a greater sense of security, as well as making the island more attractive for tourists.

The construction of the new Bird Observatory in 2012 has also resulted in additional facilities becoming available to permanent residents. While relationships have always been positive between islanders and Observatory staff and visitors, contact has increased significantly with the completion of the latest building. For the first time, there is a full bar on the island, in the Observatory lounge, and meals can be bought at the Observatory, thus there is also a *de facto* restaurant on the island. Every two weeks when the Observatory is open there is a musical evening featuring island performers and throughout the open season there are occasional lectures, presentations and workshops, including some by island residents (knitting, and wood working in particular). The Observatory is also used for accommodation by Council and other employees working on the island, and demand for accommodation has grown such that there is now a self-catering cottage and a small guesthouse providing additional bed space. Visiting yacht crews can also use the Observatory facilities for a charge. The Observatory also serves as the base for meetings of its own Board of Directors, and for similar meetings of the National Trust committees and Council groups. It has therefore become a much more significant and obvious feature in the life of the community and plays a much greater role than in previous decades. Its larger capacity means that it accommodates a larger number of tourists, mostly but not all birdwatchers, and thus increases the presence of tourists on the island generally. The Observatory also supports the stability of the island community through employment (at least three part time jobs), by purchasing all supplies when possible at the island shop (a condition of the continued operation of the shop by the current owner (Bennett, 2012) and through purchases by staff and guests at the island shop, and enlarging enrolment at the island school by one, and shortly two pupils (children of permanent Observatory staff) As the school had an enrolment of 7 students in 2013, such an expansion in numbers is important in ensuring its viability). Thus the main tourist facility and attraction is highly integrated into mainstream island life.

### **Changes and implications**

The changes in circumstances in terms of conditions on Fair Isle are due primarily to two factors, both external to the island. The first was the sale of the island to the National Trust for Scotland, and the second the more proactive policies of the Shetland Islands Council, enabled by additional revenues from off-shore oil development. The advent of Trust ownership may not, on paper appear that significant. It represented the replacement of an individual who had great personal affection for the island and its community and who was a benign and supportive landlord, by a charitable organisation with many competing interests and obligations based some three hundred kilometres away. In reality, however, ownership by the Trust has provided the basis for most of the changes that have taken place on Fair Isle in the last fifty years that have directly affected the residents of the community. The Trust has been able to access funds from the European Union and other sources that an individual could not and thus has been able to oversee the redevelopment of all the houses which it owns, and encourage and support initiatives such as the community wind generation project. General opinion of Fair Isle

residents (based on surveys in 2012 and 2013) is strongly supportive of the Trust and its actions and there has been no suggestion of a move towards a community buy-out or a desire for a change in ownership of the island. The Community Council has flourished during this period and various initiatives such as the push for a Marine Conservation Area around Fair Isle and the EU Stewardship programme have strengthened Fair Isle's image as a viable community.

Concern over protection of the marine environment surrounding Fair Isle began in 1989 when it was raised at a community council meeting. In 1995, the Fair Isle Marine Environment and Tourism Initiative (FIMETI) was established and in 1997 it published *Safeguarding Our Heritage*: a blueprint for sustainably managing the marine environment around the island. It organized workshops and became one of eight members of the Scottish Government's Scottish Coastal Forum. It produced a *Fair Isle Marine Action Plan* in 2010 following a presentation to the Scottish Parliament and in 2011 produced a *Marine Protected Area for Fair Isle Waters* proposal. Despite such efforts, no action has been taken by higher levels of government, resulting in a formal Petition to the Scottish Parliament (PE1431) for action. This noted that the European Union award to Fair Isle of a *European Diploma for Protected Areas* (one of only two awarded to Scotland) in 1985 (and which Fair Isle has held continuously since then) made as a condition of renewing the award in 2010 that "A new marine protected area should be in conformity with the Fair Isle Marine Action Plan" (Scottish Parliament, 2013). At the time of writing, no action has yet been taken on the petition or meeting the condition of the Award.

The Shetland Islands Council has traditionally seen one of its responsibilities as maintaining the population of the island group as a whole and of the outlying islands in particular (Clark, 1989) but prior to the oil revenues being available, it had very limited financial resources available for this. Since 1975 it has spent a considerable amount of the new funding on transportation within the islands, improving ferry and air services and piers, landings, and airstrips, on social services such as community halls and on improving education facilities. All of these have been manifested on Fair Isle and the Island Council is justifiably viewed as being much more positive and supportive of the island than was the case fifty years ago. External agencies such as the Scottish Office, other Whitehall departments and ministries, the Crofting Commission, fishing agencies and the Crown Estate have little direct contact or influence on Fair Isle, and the relative decline in importance of agriculture and fishing on the island has meant their significance is much less. The Scottish Government, through the Scottish Parliament, has replaced many of the Whitehall agencies in matters such as education, health, justice and transport, but again, its direct role in island life is small. The European Union is generally seen positively as a provider of regional development funding for projects but otherwise as irrelevant to the day to day operations on the island. The Northern Lighthouse Board no longer plays an active role on the island since the automation of the lights; previously the lighthouse staff and their families had been viewed as temporary residents, their children going to the local school but supplies were purchased off island and in the case of the North Light, staff were located a relatively long way from other residents with little contact. The conservation bodies such as the former Nature Conservancy and Countryside Commission for Scotland, and then Scottish Natural Heritage and its successors had some influence in terms of the designation of the northern half of the island as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) but have generally at best provided passive support for the protection of bird and other species on the island and have not taken any actions which have impacted significantly on the

human population of the island. The designation of the northern half of the island as a Site of Special Scientific Interest has had little effect upon island life as this part of the island has traditionally only been used for rough grazing of sheep, which still continues, and peat cutting which rarely takes place now with the advent of reliable electric power. This is in contrast to the situation in some other of the Shetland Islands, for example Foula, where local feeling has been against some of the protection measures which a designation as SSSI produces. Gear (cited in New Shetlander, 1983, p. 5) argued it “is a reminder that our island is no longer our own – we have lost control of our environment. The outside world can impose its own conditions and regulations on our island even to the detriment of islanders”. Such a view echoes the comments made by Swyngedouw (2009) that nature oriented programmes and policies often have implications beyond their immediate goals of protection or preservation that may favour or disadvantage other parties.

The expansion and redevelopments of the Bird Observatory have already been discussed and have been significant in improving the quality of life on the island but have had little impact on its governance. The Observatory has had an impact in terms of increasing the visibility of the island in ornithological circles and particularly by attracting increasing numbers of tourists, not all birdwatchers to the island. By previously employing a now successful popular author (Ann Cleeves), it also increased the island’s visibility to a wider audience, culminating in Fair Isle being the setting for a murder mystery (*Blue Lightning*) that was made into a BBC television program, aired in 2014. It might have been expected that the increased number of tourists staying at the Observatory would have resulted in increased pressure on residents, especially at peak migration times, but dialogue and agreements between the Observatory and residents, and clear guidance on appropriate behaviour to visitors have avoided potential conflict situations. Attitudes between local residents and those at the Bird Observatory remain as positive as they were in 1956 when the then Observatory warden noted,

Relations between the Fair Isle folk and the bird watchers continue to be most cordial, and again it is a pleasure to express our gratitude to the islanders for so readily permitting access to their crops, and helping our activities by reporting rare birds and assisting us in many other ways (FIBO, 1956, p. 13).

The resident population has experienced the vagaries of birdwatchers for over a century, and many of them are skilled at bird identification and share the enjoyment of recording new or rare migrants to the island, and regularly contact the Observatory to inform staff and visitors of rarities. The fact that the Observatory is located out of sight of any crofts and at least a kilometre distant from the nearest means that except when a rarity is found, visitors vacate the southern settled part of the island by around 5.00 p.m. each day and do not return to that part of the island until around 10.00 a.m. There is thus a buffer zone in terms of both space and time between islanders and visitors.

## Conclusion

This study of Fair Isle has thrown some light on the relationship between the local community, those controlling relevant policy formulation and implementation, and the growing and changing forces that have affected the overall environment of the island. Of these forces, tourism has become the principal driver of the economy and way of life of the island community and in some ways this study has proven similar in result to that noted by Beahm (2009, p. i),

Through a case study approach, this study investigates the potential of tourism as an equitable development strategy. Also, it analyzes the dynamics of the relationship between tourism development and local human-environment issues.

The successful situation on Fair Isle in terms of governance and institutional arrangements reflects a number of elements, the principal one being a shared interest between all parties in the continued habitation of the island, as confirmed in the policies of the Shetland Islands Council, the main political agency and the policies of the landowner (NTS). When there are disagreements, for example over the lack of action in establishing a Marine Conservation Area around Fair Isle, they are normally with agencies beyond Shetland, such as the Scottish government in Edinburgh or the UK government in London. Thus, the relationships between the local population and its traditional way of life, tourism and nature conservation are generally positive, if not symbiotic, an encouraging sign that appropriate tourism can be a reality and not just wishful thinking.

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