

## Trip to Scotland READER 2023

Between 27 and 30 March, a delegation made up of the Asturian Rural Development Network, the eleven Rural Development Groups and the Director General for Rural Development and Agri-Food of the Government of the Principality of Asturias, **Begoña López Fernández**, visited the Scottish Highlands, a trip that had been pending since 2020.



An intense and fruitful week of visits and exchanges of experiences with different entities, where community projects are of great importance and Brexit is a continuous lament, as was repeated throughout these days, as they have lost an important volume of funding, depending exclusively on the Scottish government, and with a planning that does not go beyond the annual.

### The most institutional day

Monday turned out to be the most institutional day of the trip, with a visit to the **University of Inverness Campus**, where the **Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE)** is based.

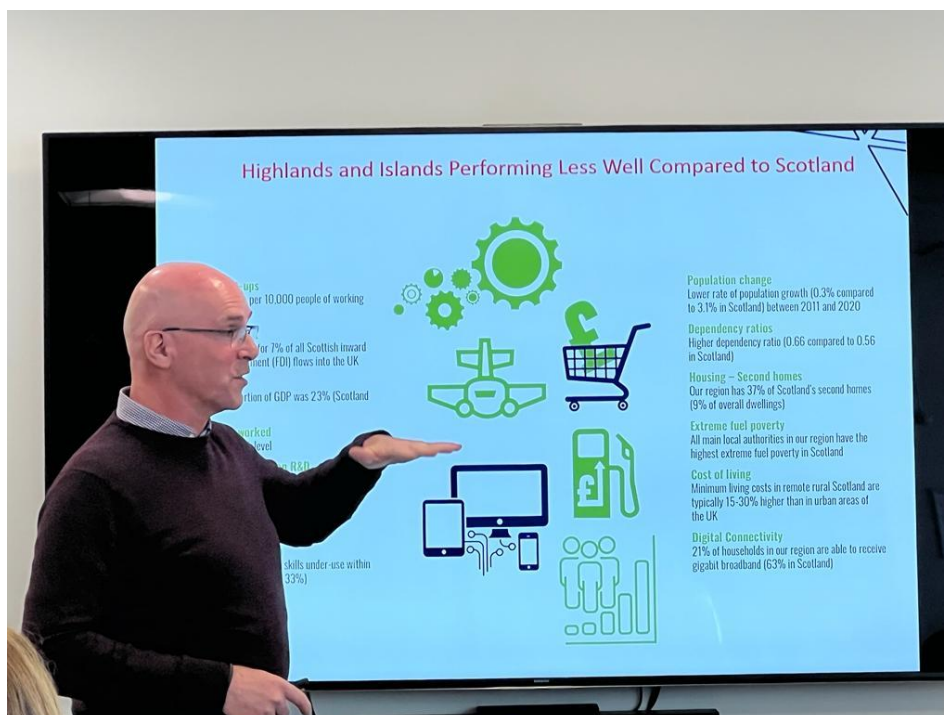


The day began with a welcome from **Vanessa Halhead**, honorary president of **Scottish Rural Action (SRA)** and member of the **Scottish Rural Parliament**, where she defended the Scottish rural environment from a broad perspective without exclusions, building bridges between society and the political class, to give a voice to the rural areas of Scotland.

Afterwards, the Director General of the Principality and the Vice-President of READER, **Amelia Fernández López**, thanked for the invitation and the welcome, while the manager of the RDG Bajo Nalón made a short presentation about the Network and its Development Groups.



**Robin Clarke** from the **HIE** spoke about the socio-economic context, recognising the defects and virtues they currently have, which coincide to a large extent with our own. He highlighted as positive the high level of entrepreneurship, a higher percentage of innovation in entrepreneurship and renewable energies as a great resource. On the negative side, a lower level of exports, slow population growth, resulting in an ageing population, lack of housing and energy poverty, connectivity that is improving, but the difficulty in connecting remote areas. The role of the institution he represents is variable, depending on the needs of developers in the region, which has the lowest population density in Europe after Scandinavia at 8.5%.



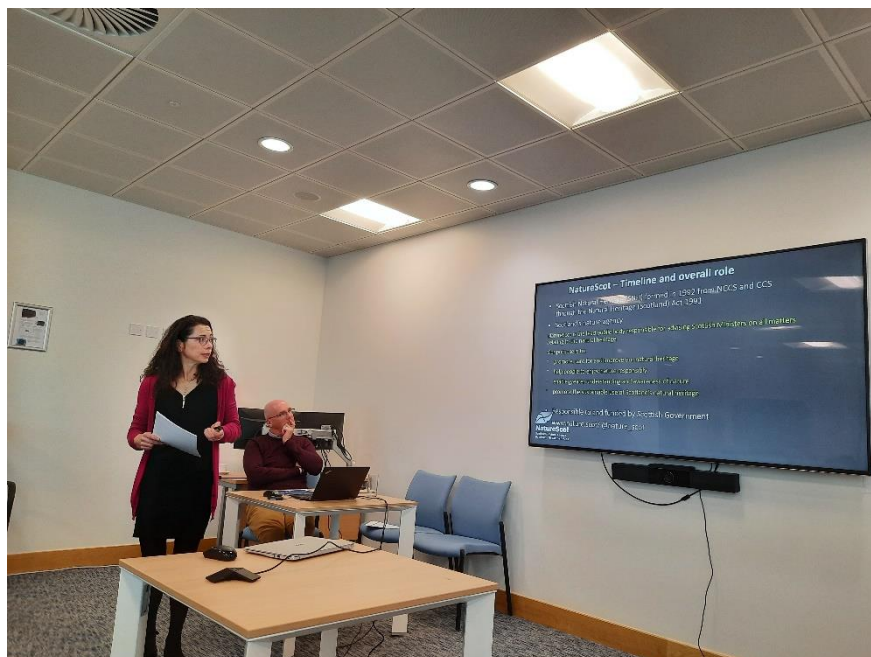




**Jayne Golding of HITRANS** (partner in the international Ruralities project in which READER also participates), spoke about the problems of public transport in the Highlands and showed several initiatives of public-private cooperation and bold solutions for urban and rural areas with great weight of the use of technology. He based the solutions on adapting the service to effective demand through the use of artificial intelligence, as well as networking and coordination.



**María de la Torre**, for the state agency **Nature Scot**, pointed out that the fight against climate change and for diversity is of paramount importance. Her organisation defends the model of the enhancement of value to protect a species and promote the green economy. He highlighted as a star project the recovery of peatlands for carbon sequestration as part of the cultural heritage of the area.





After the exhibitions, we visited the University of the Highlands and Islands Campus, where higher education is provided both at university and undergraduate level, mostly focused on health, environment and technology.







In the afternoon there was a visit to the **Impact Hub Inverness**, where **Brian Weaver**, co-founder of the HUB, spoke about the happy times before Brexit and about his project, which although it does not receive direct public funding, its main clients are public institutions. There was also the opportunity to learn about other projects with community involvement, such as the **Highland Community Waste Partnership** through its coordinator **Isabel McLeish**, aimed at promoting recycling and the second chance of all kinds of household goods, with a clear environmental basis.





The day concluded with an official reception at the Highlands and Islands City Hall in Inverness, with the reception led by Provost **Glynis Campbell-Synclair**.











The Asturian Network presented the different entities that received the Asturian delegation with a gift consisting of a heart with the words in English "Being rural is a value, not a handicap" and the book 'Asturias. En cuerpo y alma' ('Asturias. In body and soul'), published by Delallama Editorial.







## Isle of Skye

Tuesday was the day of the longest journey to the Isle of Skye, in the west of the island. There we were welcomed by the heads of the **Sabhal Mòr Ostaig Study Centre (SOM)**, based on Gaelic language and culture, who pointed out the importance of the institution as a driving force for the development of the island.

The deputy director of this educational and cultural preservation centre, **Eairdsidh McLean**, spoke of the opportunities arising from the defence of the Gaelic language, based on a strategy that includes teaching, research, schooling and the enhancement of cultural heritage.





**Donnie Munro**, SMO's Director of Development and the Arts, focused his speech on the importance of gaining political support for Gaelic, which he has achieved with all parties, and developing initiatives for its protection and enhancement. They have developed several projects that, based on the defence of the Gaelic community, have served to attract people to the island and develop housing policies. He explained that the focus has been on developing language skills and increasing the number of Gaelic speakers not only in the Highlands, but throughout Scotland.

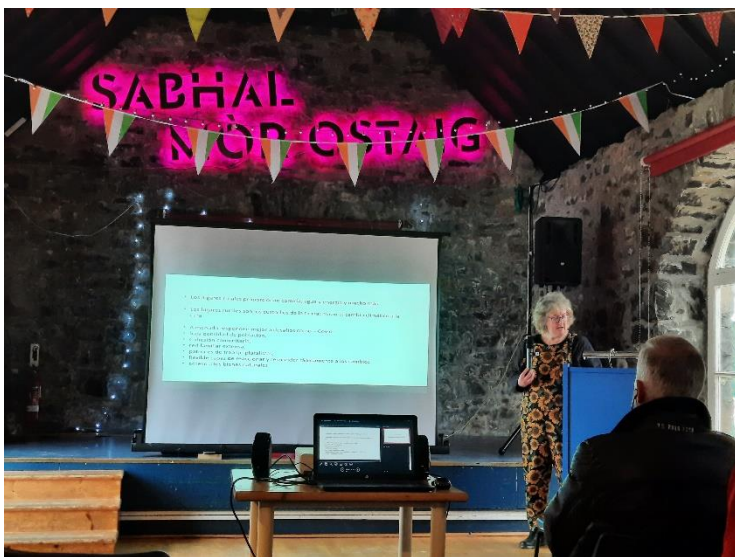


He pointed out that emigration left land to be taken over by more affluent people from elsewhere and the difficulty of finding housing for young people from Skye or others who want to settle in the area. Hence, the educational centre itself is the promoter of a housing community, an affordable and community housing, also contemplated as an educational project.

SOM has a holistic conception where artistic residencies of all kinds are also carried out, where "language is not just words". The digitisation of existing BBC holdings, now accessible through online media, is being carried out, where "the sounds and traditions of Scotland" are collected.

For Munro, "supporting all of this from the emotional and cultural aspects gives them socio-economic value is a critical point. By this very fact you are creating jobs, you are creating opportunities. Content must be created, multimedia, audiovisual and literary development must be carried out. He said that "in 17 years of life, the impact generated is 10 times the impact received".

**Theona Morrison** is chair of Scottish Rural Action and founder of CoDEL. She spoke of the changes needed for tourism and its head-on collision with housing policies. In relation to Gaelic and languages, she pointed out that "the social value of language must be understood as fundamental".



For the president of SRA, SOM is an example of "how to regenerate through education, language and culture. This is also a way of repopulating and we must celebrate those who return and stay, however few they may be".



She also referred to the work they are carrying out on "redefining the peripheries and changing the narrative, the story". This is where CoDEL comes in, a social micro-enterprise that supports remote territories "to change the narrative, but also to change it at home" and pointed out the need to generate activities, not just economic activity to attract and maintain population.

Morrison stressed the need to "accept that people go out to see the world, but also that they come back with new visions".

**Màrtainn Mac a'Bhàillidh** is an architect and a volunteer in an association that also focuses on housing. In his speech he spoke of the need to regulate the housing market in the face of tourism, "the damage done by Airbnb", and to promote access to housing. "There is an ageing of the population because young people are leaving because they cannot find housing", and he pointed to cohousing as an option.



In the afternoon, the Asturian delegation travelled to another site on the Isle of Skye to visit **Broadford and Strath Community Company (B&SBC)**. After visiting the Broadford community



campsite, which is open to the public and represents an important source of income for the Community, the delegation had the opportunity to visit the Men's Shed: a meeting point where older men do DIY to combat loneliness, alcoholism or mental illness, also taking into account the high rate of suicides.



The community complex is complemented by a hotel and a community vegetable garden where they also carry out community work and school visits, as well as preparing the extension of the campsite, as there is more demand for places than there is supply. The campsite is already making a profit, managed by volunteers, and its income is reverted to the community.

After visiting the various facilities, an exchange of experiences took place, with **Jeff Carry**, treasurer of the Broadford Community, describing the work of his group, founded in 2003 and with 35 projects under its belt. In addition to the 8,000 hours of volunteer work between the different projects, five new jobs have also been created.



### **Cairngorms National Park**

The day started with a visit to the **Cairngorms National Park (CNP)** facilities in Grantown, where we were given a context of the Park, the environment and the community itself, as well as its involvement.

**Grant Moir**, CEO of the Park, explained that the Cairngorms is the largest in the UK with an area half the size of Asturias, an annual budget of £1.5 million and a population of just 19,000. Most of the land is privately owned, so it works on a public-private model involving over 100 different organisations and individuals. They receive around 2 million visitors a year, compared to 1.2 million more than 20 years ago. They work very hard to avoid pressure and negative impact on the environment.

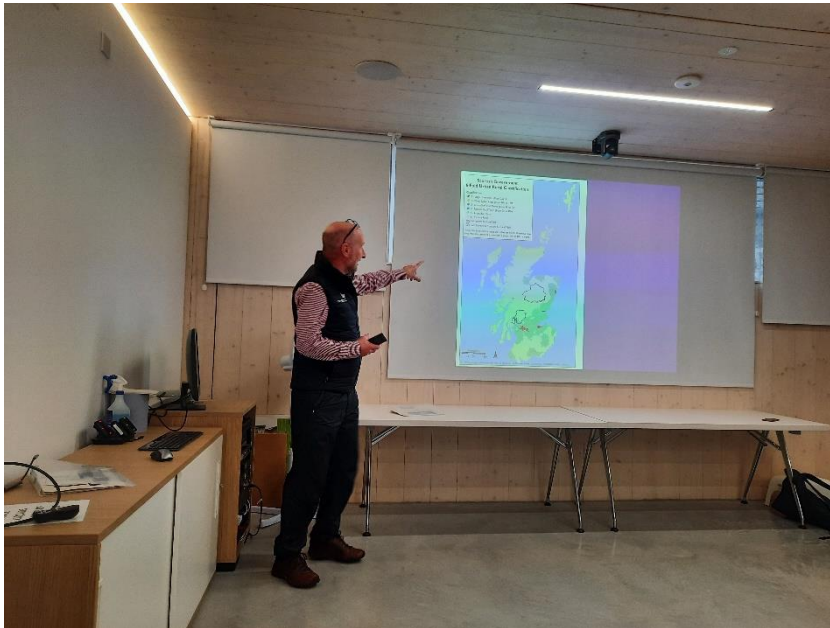
The main motives of visitors are landscape, wildlife and culture. In fact there are interesting experiences





around bird watching and they are now immersed in how to manage climate change. This leads them to design a new strategy also to reduce carbon by 75% by 20230, while being carbon neutral by 2045. Peatland restoration, expansion of native forests, sustainable public transport within the Park, energy efficient accommodation, along with an analysis of how visitors arrive and move around, all play an important role here.

**Murray Ferguson**, the CNP's Director of Planning, talks about the fact that most of the land is privately owned and that creates some tension with landowners for certain interventions. The



Park's role here is that of a conductor in an area where only 12% of the land is owned by the Scottish Government. And all without losing sight of the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage (it is not in vain that 85% of the grouse in the United Kingdom live here), as well as placing value on knowledge and enjoyment.

Ferguson also recalled the days when they had LEADER funding, whereas now they are waiting to see how the post-Brexit period will work out.

**Jason Martin** from the local **Chamber of Commerce** commented on the business possibilities linked to the National Park brand. He spoke of a kind of guarantor housing company that would ensure that the owner would be paid for and retain the property, given the pressure on housing and the lack of employment in the area. The existence of affordable housing also means the creation of jobs in an area where companies have between 1 and 10 people employed.

He also explained that they are developing a product similar to experience tourism with different nuances, aimed at the deseasonalisation of tourism.

**Cristian Pizarro** presented the **Laggan WolfTrax Mountain Bike Centre Manager** initiative to develop tourism linked to mountain biking, with routes at different levels and with room for different types of tourism.





The project also includes community engagement and is present in three primary schools, with professional coaches, bicycles and transport. "This way, different impacts are being worked on at various levels," Pizarro said.

Afterwards, a visit was made to the town of Grantown, where among the projects visited, the hotel aimed at ornithological tourism stood out for its services and infrastructures.









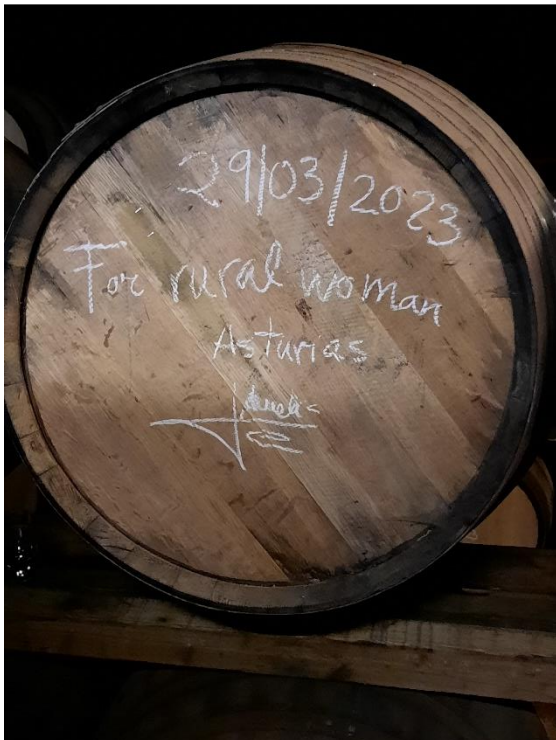
## Speyside

In the afternoon, the Whiskey Valley on the River Spey was visited. **Sally Mackenzie**, from the Cairngorms National Park Conservation Office, spoke of the importance of the River Spey in the local economy. It is noted for its salmon potential and the 53 distilleries that line its banks. Although the quality of the water is good, similar to that of Asturias, they are working on different projects to improve it, as well as to introduce species that have disappeared, such as the beaver. The river has been declared an area of special protection by the EU, and is home to species such as salmon, otters, lamprey and river mussels.

**Sandy McIntyre**, manager of the 1897 **Tamdhu Distillery**, described her business from a very emotional, traditional perspective, with roots and feeling, a perfect example of how to sell product, history and tradition, creating Brand Scotland and Spey. After the visit to the distillery, the Asturian delegation was invited to the privilege of signing a pair of casks where the whisky is aged. The signing was carried out by the vice-president of READER, Amelia Fernández López, and the president of the Grupo de Desarrollo Bajo Nalón, Jaime Menéndez Corrales, the most veteran of the mayors of Asturias who was retiring next June.







Afterwards we had the opportunity to accompany **Brian Cameron, from Elchies Farm**, where he showed us his farm and the associated point of sale at the entrance with vending machines, an example of direct sales set up during the pandemic and which continues to give very good results.











The day concluded with a fellowship dinner at the Archiestown Village Hall community centre, which was accompanied by music from local musicians.



## Cromarty

**Cromarty is an active village on the Moray Fjord, on what is known as the Black Isle, although it is not actually an island but a peninsula. Although small (just over 700 inhabitants), it has a vibrant community activity, with a very committed population that has taken 42 projects forward. As **Catriona Mallows** of SRA recalled, "it wasn't always as active as it is today, but it is now an attractive place for young people".**

The day began with a visit to the community **cinema in Cromarty**, where volunteer **Nicola Gear** explained that the project is more than just a cinema, but has a socio-cultural dimension as its main





value, financed at the time by 60% LEADER funds, plus neighbourhood financial support. Built in six months, it was inaugurated just before the pandemic in January 2020, but it did not stop working, rented by families. It has a room with 35 places and was designed by a local architect.



**Gordon Adam**, chairman of the **Black Isle Community** (a community-oriented NGO) spoke of slow tourism as part of an inclusive community idea that is socially and economically sustainable with the help of all.



For his part, the president of the **Transition Black Isle** association, **Julian Paren**, focused on

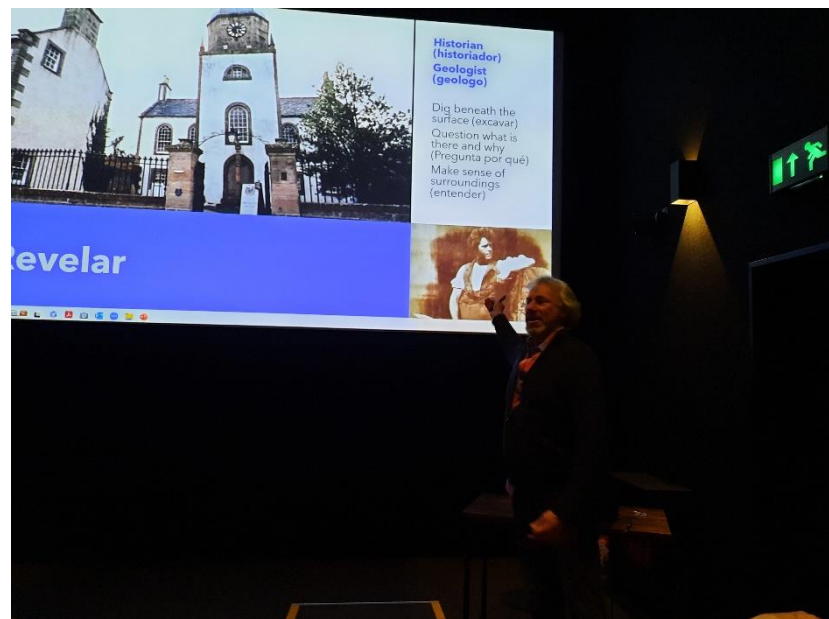


environmental issues of zero emission and environmental awareness processes and responsible agriculture, with its themed farmers' markets. He acknowledged that they have failed in community energy projects and was sceptical of government action to solve community problems, so he

claimed the power of civil society as a driver. Transition Black Isle is part of an international movement for a green transition.

Historian **David Alston** argued for the protection of heritage but also for its rational use and to make way for functional modernity. "Knowledge of history and culture helps us to understand and solve many of today's problems," he said.

**Jon Palmer**, a local artist and entrepreneur, a very active member of the community, who has recovered some old stables as a space for artists, a collective that abounds in Cromarty, closed his participation. He also noted "the need to communicate everything you do".



The presentation of more rural hearts, a tour of Cromarty and a final convivial meal brought this comprehensive and interesting trip to the Highlands to a close.







