

Rural Alternatives Project: *Cultural Skills & Community Woodlands*



Case study no. 5: Natural dyeing and wool-crafts in Sunart

An important outcome of the Rural Alternatives Project (RAP) in Sunart has been the establishment of a group interested in traditional wool-crafts and the use of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for natural dyeing. The group meets regularly for full-day or weekend sessions focusing on a particular craft or technique. Up to 16 people have taken part at different points in the project, and a core group of 10 attend events regularly.

The story of the group so far

The group developed organically from two main starting points. As part of RAP, an 'Introduction to natural dyeing' workshop was held in October 2006 with expert dyers Lesley and Tom Kilbride from Applecross. This was an inspiring day and showed that there was clearly enthusiasm to do more, as well as to investigate ways of using the natural-dyed wool. At the same time a project based in West Ardnamurchan, with a focus on making good use of rural resources, was funding spinning classes. There was considerable overlap between those interested in dyeing and those interested in spinning, and when the spinning classes ended many learners started coming regularly to the dyeing group to maintain and improve their skills.



The group is made up mainly of women, although a small number of men have attended individual sessions.

Objectives

- To investigate ways of adding value to local fleece (currently a very low-value resource) through traditional craft techniques, in particular natural dyeing using local plants, lichens and fungi.
- To maintain and pass on traditional knowledge of local plants and wool-crafts.
- To provide an opportunity for interested locals to become proficient in these traditional skills, and ultimately to enable some individuals to integrate elements of these skills into their livelihoods, either through producing and selling crafts or through training others.

Activities

- The group meets for one-day or weekend workshops focusing on a particular activity. Natural dyeing and spinning are still core activities, to which felting has recently been added. We have also had one-off sessions on tapestry using simple greenwood frames, and weaving.
- As group members' enthusiasm and confidence increase, individuals are working and experimenting on their own, which means that each time the group meets people have discovered new techniques or interesting results which can be shared with the group.

- In addition to these workshops, the group has demonstrated spinning, natural dyeing and felting at the Sunart Show in August 2007 and at a Slow Food day and craft fair in November 2007. Members of the group have also carried out spinning and natural dyeing sessions with pupils from Ardnamurchan High School.

Contributions to rural livelihoods

- Regular participants include those who come along from general interest, but also a number of artists who are interested in the application of some of the skills in their work. One is hoping to open a gallery in the near future, which will include examples of textiles made through the group's sessions. A second has taken up a college course in textiles since joining the group.
- Several group members keep sheep, and have found the group a useful outlet for selling their fleece. The majority of the fleece used is locally produced.
- Since the start of the project, local trainers Janette Borwick and Kate Campbell are becoming recognised locally and further afield as trainers, and have been invited to carry out training workshops throughout Lochaber. They have also participated as trainers for natural dyeing in a separate Reforesting Scotland woodland event in Lochgilphead.
- Janette, who had never done any felting before the group was formed, has now become very skilled and as well as training others has begun to sell her own felted products through local outlets and craft fairs.
- Experts from further afield have also been brought in from time to time. These include the Kilbrides (mentioned above) and Sheila Bates, who gave an introduction to felting. There has also been some overlap between this group and other training organised through RAP, with, for example, many textile group members attending the fungi identification days in order to learn to identify fungi for use in natural dyeing.
- The group provides a forum for meeting and sharing experiences, skills and ideas. There is no similar group locally which brings people together from such a wide area.

The future and long-term sustainability



The group was initiated and has been principally supported financially by RAP as well as by the local project Sgilean na Coille. However both the lead trainers are committed to continuing regardless of the availability of funding. Thanks to RAP there is now sufficient expertise within the group to develop skills further without needing to bring in expert help from outside.

Aside from training provision, the most important consideration for ensuring the group's sustainability is for someone to organize and coordinate communications. This role has to date been provided by Isabel Isherwood as RAP's local coordinator in the Sunart area. Despite the strength of the group this role remains a necessity due to the wide dispersal of group members, which without a coordinator would result in the group disintegrating.

It is not yet clear how the group might develop in the long term, although a variety of possibilities have been discussed, including:

- Remaining as an informal association of individual craftspeople, both amateurs and others who may work as trainers or producers, providing each other with a support network and a forum for exchanging skills and ideas as well as passing on skills to newcomers.
- Meeting for more structured projects such as collaboration on larger pieces (for example wall-hangings), or long-term projects such as cataloguing the range of natural dye colours available from local plants.

- Forming a craft cooperative to sell produce, possibly through the Ariundle Centre (however individual group members do not yet have the confidence to commit to such a step).
- Integration into the proposed Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Training Network, with the aim of developing the capacity of local trainers and delivering training courses in natural dyeing and wool-crafts in the Sunart area for learners from both the local area and further afield.

Lessons learned

This group has developed its own momentum and is expected to outlive RAP. This success is mainly down to two factors:

- **Committed local trainers** The group has benefited considerably from the existing skills and expertise of two local women: Janette Borwick and Kate Campbell. These two have done the vast majority of the training between them, and Kate has provided the venue for most of the sessions. They have been paid as trainers through RAP, but at a very low rate, and this does not take into account the many hours of preparation time put in voluntarily. Janette is an artist and retired teacher, and a self-taught dyer, spinner, weaver, and (since the start of this project) felter. Kate is the owner of the Ariundle Centre (a cafe and crafts centre), and also a dyer and spinner. Working with these local trainers, who are committed to the project and prepared to put in time voluntarily, provided an early injection of enthusiasm and the constant reinforcement needed to enable learners to stay motivated and develop their skills gradually over time. This is much more valuable in terms of sharing skills than a one-off workshop, however skilled and inspiring the trainer may be.
- **Following the interests of the group** rather than trying to direct activities. This was particularly relevant when the group became very interested in felting, which moved the focus away from the original NTFP-oriented starting point of natural dyes. However exploration of felting has not corresponded with a reduction of interest in natural dyes, it has instead allowed the group to develop another outlet for its natural-dyed wool.

RESOURCES: USEFUL CONTACTS

- Lesley and Tom Kilbride (dyers and weavers), Croft Wools, Ri-Aulaidh, Cuaig, Strathcarron, Wester Ross IV54 8XU, 01520 755260
www.wester-ross.com/croftwools.htm
- Sheila Bates, Felting, Croft 7, Knockbain, Kirkhill, Inverness IV5 7PL, 01463 831320
www.croft7.net
- Highland Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers, c/o Sheila Bates, Croft 7, Knockbain, Kirkhill, Inverness IV5 7PL, 01463 831320



*For further information about the Rural Alternatives Project, visit:
www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/rural_alternatives.php*

For general information about non-timber forest products, visit: www.forestharchest.org.uk