RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

ISLANDS (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM RSPB SCOTLAND

Summary
RSPB Scotland welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence on the Islands (Scotland) Bill, and the overall intention of the Bill to reflect the importance of islands in Scottish public policy. Our islands are among the most important places for wildlife in Europe and are disproportionately important compared to the mainland. Often, it is the continuation of traditional land management practices, tied into the islands’ cultural heritage, which sustains much of this natural heritage. These important environmental, cultural and economic assets are also spread across interconnected inhabited and uninhabited islands.

Thus, the bill must (a) recognise the natural heritage importance and ensure that this is protected and enhanced and (b) apply its measures to all islands.

The national islands plan must require Scottish Ministers to set out their objectives and strategy for both islands (including their environment) and island communities. The environmental outcomes for Scotland’s islands should include protection of their seabird populations, action to address INNS and support for HNV farming and crofting.

We also suggest modest changes to the marine licensing provisions to align these with the operation of the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010.

Background
Scotland has 1,382 islands over 1ha in size or over 7,000 if smaller outcrops are counted. These islands are among the most important places for wildlife in Europe and are disproportionately important for native wild animals and plants when compared to mainland areas. More details of this outstanding natural heritage are set out in Annex 1.

RSPB Scotland has approximately 80,000 members supporting the conservation of wildlife in Scotland. We manage 39 nature reserves across 29 of Scotland’s islands which, in part, underlines the natural heritage significance of the islands. This nature conservation work also contributes local economies and cultures. As well as tourism, RSPB Scotland helps provide other benefits to island communities including employment, additional income for graziers where RSPB Scotland reserves need grazing and opportunities for the development of new skills (e.g. the training element of the Machair Life+ project).

Our advisory work is also a key element to island conservation where maintaining lower intensity agriculture including High Nature Value farming, is often desirable. Helping develop agri-environment scheme applications is a win-win example of this and is particularly important to get right in these sensitive and highly important areas. We also run events and provide educational opportunities for local schools on some
islands. On many islands, RSPB Scotland staff are part of the island community and make significant contributions to island life, both professionally and personally.

**Islands and their natural heritage**
Annex 1 describes in some detail the outstanding natural heritage of our islands.

On inhabited islands, it is often the continuation of traditional land management practices, tied into the islands’ cultural heritage, which sustains much of the natural heritage. Close links to the natural environment are characteristic of island communities; with livelihoods often reliant on sustainable management practices on land and at sea. However, only about 93 islands in Scotland are currently inhabited and uninhabited islands provide hugely important refuges for sensitive and threatened species. Larger, uninhabited islands are often important grazing areas for land managers from neighbouring inhabited islands. Uninhabited islands can also have a deep cultural significance, particularly if they have been previously inhabited. They can also be important for local identity of nearby island communities – where identity is often linked to a group of islands, both inhabited and uninhabited. Additionally, many uninhabited islands are important eco-tourism and cultural destinations such as St Kilda and Staffa which attract large numbers of visitors and make a significant contribution to local economies.

Many Scottish island economies are heavily dependent on tourism, and much of this tourism is associated with the natural heritage. For example, an economic study of sea eagles on Mull found that over £5,000,000 is contributed to the island economy as a direct result of people visiting to see these magnificent birds. RSPB Scotland’s Loch Gruinart nature reserve on Islay attracts twice as many tourists as the largest distillery for which Islay is famous and our Balranald reserve is the second most visited site on the Uists. Therefore, as well as underpinning traditional island industries such as fishing and farming, a healthy natural environment, rich in native species, is incredibly important for island economies.

For the reasons described above, RSPB Scotland believes that the Islands (Scotland) Bill should:

- Recognise the natural heritage importance of our islands, and ensure that measures taken under the bill should take full account of this – as well as other legislation and policy that seeks to protect and enhance this outstanding natural heritage; and

- Recognise that Scotland’s islands are a complex and inter-connected mix of inhabited and uninhabited islands – and that the economy, society and environment of the former are often inter-related to the management of the latter.

**National islands plan**
As indicated above, RSPB Scotland considers that the purpose of the national islands plan should be to set out a public statement of the Scottish Ministers’ objectives and strategy for all islands – and, within that, their objectives and strategy for island communities. The former may be implicit in the latter in that it makes little sense to state the latter without knowing the former – but it would be clearer and
more transparent to stakeholders and islanders, alike, to make this explicit in the legislation.

The legislation should also include a requirement that the plan should recognise the Ministers’ existing (and continuing) commitments to environmental protection (e.g. Biodiversity Convention, Natura sites) and how these should be delivered in a manner consistent with wider social and economic ambitions. This might best be done by a commitment to ensure that the plan is linked to, and consistent with, for instance the National Performance Framework, the National Planning Framework, the Land Use and Biodiversity Strategies and the National Marine Plan.

In setting out their objectives and strategy for both islands and island communities, Scottish Ministers must take account of the disproportionate environmental importance of Scotland’s islands – and ensure that island communities are sufficiently supported to care for these environmental assets, both in terms of expert advice and finance. The environmental outcomes for Scotland’s islands, set in a future islands plan, should include the key natural heritage issues, set out in annex 1, such as the protection of their seabird populations, action to address INNS and support for HNV farming and crofting.

**Development in the Scottish Island Marine Area**

The proposal to establish a scheme for licensing development in Scottish island marine areas appears to be a sensible approach in principle. Bringing management of activity in the marine environment closer to island communities could deliver benefits from a natural heritage perspective through greater understanding, responsibility, ownership, accountability, and participation and is consistent with elements of the Convention on Biological Diversity’s principles of the ‘Ecosystem Approach’. However, it will be critical that local authorities have access to the resources and expertise to meet the requirements of this role.

It should be noted that the opportunity for island authorities to exercise greater strategic control over development and activity in the marine area out to 12 nautical miles already exist through provisions in Part 3 of the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 for the preparation of a Regional Marine Plan (RMP) by a delegate of Scottish Ministers. Whereas delegates, known as Regional Marine Planning Partnerships, have received Ministerial direction in Shetland and Clyde marine regions, progress in other regions established by the Scottish Marine Regions Order 2013 (in addition to those above, the Orkney Islands, Outer Hebrides, Argyll and West Highland marine regions all encompass significant inhabited islands) is less advanced and consideration should be given to whether or not a RMP is in place prior to the establishment of an island licensing area. In any case, we would recommend that Island Marine Areas, if established, should align as far as possible with the existing marine regions.

There is a need to maintain consistency with the existing marine licensing regulatory framework as set out in Part 4 of the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010. This will help ensure a positive and sustainable approach to development control within Island Marine Areas. It will also avoid unnecessarily burdening local authorities and commercial operations by duplicating existing marine licencing requirements.
At this stage, one specific change we recommend is to use the definition of licensable marine activities as set out in the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 (s.21(1) 1&2). This is considered sufficient and should be used instead of the meaning of development activity given in s.16 of the Islands (Scotland) Bill. Two different definitions is both inconsistent and confusing.

RSPB Scotland
September 2017
ANNEX 1

Islands and the Natural Heritage

Scotland has 1,382 islands over 1ha in size or over 7,000 if smaller outcrops are counted.

These islands are among the most important places for wildlife in Europe and are disproportionately important for native wild animals and plants when compared to mainland areas. Moreover, for some high conservation priority species and groups of species - notably seabirds, waders, great yellow bumblebee, the Irish lady’s tresses orchid and the endemic Scottish primrose - islands comprise the critical national stronghold. They host some of our most important and treasured High Nature Value farmed landscapes, upland and coastal habitats, and support a unique array of endemic subspecies such as the Orkney vole, Hebridean song thrush and St Kilda wren.

The importance of these species and habitats is recognised by the presence on or around Scotland’s islands of many sites designated for their international importance. Thus, our islands are associated with 22% of the UK’s Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and 10% of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs); respectively 25% and 40% of Scotland’s SPAs and SACs.

Given the Scottish Government’s welcome commitment to maintain environmental standards, whatever the outcome of the ‘Brexit’ process, it is important that the value of these Natura sites is recognised – and their protection and management supported, including with sufficient funding.

Although important for a wide range of natural heritage and environmental assets, there are three species groups or environmental issues that are of outstanding (indeed, international or global) importance on Scotland’s islands. These are addressed more fully below.

1. Seabirds
Scotland’s islands are vital to internationally important numbers of seabirds. Eight of the ten largest seabird colonies in Scotland are located on islands such as St Kilda, Fair Isle and Rum and the Bass Rock is now the world’s largest colony of northern gannets. Some species for which Scotland’s islands are particularly important are:
   - **Northern gannet** – nearly 60% of the global population breed on Scottish islands.
   - **Red-necked phalarope** – 100% of UK population breed in Shetland and the Outer Hebrides.
   - **Great skua** – 60% of the global population breeds primarily on the Northern Isles.
   - **Leach’s petrel** – 100% of the UK population and nearly all of Europe’s population breed on a few Scottish islands.

Reflecting on the global pattern, many of these seabirds are struggling and there has been a 50% decline in the combined breeding population of 12 regularly monitored seabird species around Scotland since 1986. The pressures faced by these seabirds include reduction in food availability due to overfishing and climate change,
predation by invasive non-native species, and marine pollution. Notwithstanding these declines, Scotland’s seabirds remain a significant asset – both intrinsically and as a wildlife tourism attraction. The seabirds of the northern isles, as well as west coast and islands in the Forth, all contribute significantly to the local tourism economies.

2. **Invasive non-native species**

Invasive non-native species (INNS) – that is, species that are moved and introduced to the wild by people, either deliberately or accidentally, and cause ecological or economic damage in these new areas where they don’t naturally occur - are one of the core drivers of biodiversity loss globally, and at European and national scales.

All island environments are highly sensitive and susceptible to INNS, due to their isolation from the mainland. This means many islands don't naturally host mainland competitors and mammal predators, and is the key reason for the huge numbers of breeding seabirds and other ground nesting species. When people introduce such predators (especially rats, stoats, mice and cats), the native breeding birds cannot cope with the higher levels of mortality and breeding failure. Populations thus decline; often to local, and sometimes even global, extinction. The Manx shearwater, a relative of albatrosses of which Scotland supports around 1/3 of the entire world breeding population, is now heavily concentrated on Rum. Over the past couple of centuries, at least a dozen Manx shearwater colonies in Scotland have been lost, mostly due to introduced non-native predators, especially rats.

It is possible, however, to defend and restore islands for wildlife in the face of INNS problems, through island restoration programmes involving mammal eradication efforts and, critically, biosecurity planning and implementation. This biosecurity delivers monitoring and vigilance to detect and prevent new INNS arrivals, and rapid response measures for new incursions. With INNS, acting at the earliest feasible invasion stage or, preferably, preventing establishment in the first place, are universally recognised as the hugely preferable approaches in both ecological and financial terms.

Such island restoration and biosecurity work can build real resilience in island wildlife populations facing long-term threats such as climate change. Maximising breeding opportunities for seabirds around Scotland through island restoration work will help them to successfully exploit the declining food supply that is resulting from climate-change driven impacts on the marine food-web. A programme of island restoration projects across the Scottish archipelago could be a ground-breaking approach to climate change adaptation for our globally important wildlife.

3. **High Nature Value Farming**

High nature value (HNV) farming and crofting epitomises long term sustainable agriculture where active land management provides benefits for biodiversity, landscape, cultural heritage, soil and water resources and carbon storage. Theses systems of food production play a key role in maintaining some of Scotland’s nationally and internationally important habitats and species.

HNV systems in Scotland are, broadly, the crofting and livestock dominated upland hill farming systems with low-intensity practices. Some distinctive qualities of HNV agriculture include small scale crop rotations producing mosaics of land use, low-
intensity grazing, late harvests, fallows and allowing arable flowers to flourish and seed. These systems predominate in the north and west of the country and are particularly evident in the Hebridean crofting areas and across our islands including Shetland.

The high nature value of these farming and crofting systems is evident from the great variety of wildlife associated with this land use and the number of species occurring in these areas that are rare or absent across the remainder of the UK. These include:

- **Corncrake** - declined by 90% across the UK since 1970, and their last remaining strongholds are on the Scottish islands.
- **Twite** - small seed eating finches that rely on low-intensity meadows and crops. The vast majority of the twite population is now restricted to the low-intensity agricultural areas in North and West Scotland, including Skye, and across Shetland.
- **Wading birds** – Scotland’s islands are a stronghold for internationally important wader populations. Species such as the lapwing thrive on low-intensity farmland and are increasingly absent from higher input/higher output farming systems on the mainland.
- **Machair grassland** - is a rare habitat unique to Scotland and parts of Ireland, and mainly confined to the islands. On some islands, rotational cropping of cereals and removal of summer grazing are practiced which helps support this diverse wildlife. Without these traditional farming and crofting systems in place, this biodiversity would disappear.
- **Great Yellow Bumblebee** - this rare bumblebee is only found on the north and west fringes of Scotland on the machair grasslands; their population is largely sustained by low-intensity farming and crofting.
- **Species-rich grasslands** - the floristic diversity of low-intensity grasslands in crofting areas is unrivalled anywhere in the UK. This wildflower spectacle is a vitally important habitat supporting a vast number and diversity of invertebrates. Its annual seed production sustains a variety of rare and declining seed-eating finches, such as twite and corn bunting.

The worst thing for all of these species and habitats – some of Scotland’s and the UK’s rarest and most iconic – would be abandonment of agriculture in these HNV farming and crofting areas. The adoption of more intensive farming would be equally damaging. Many of these systems rely on public support to remain viable, and agri-environment schemes are vitally important to the islands both financially and ecologically. The corncrake is the best example of where public money to support specific HNV farming practices has halted and reversed the decline of this species in Scotland. It is essential that future support for farming and crofting recognises the importance of these activities. Public money must be invested in ways that help support HNV farmers and crofters to maintain and enhance these distinctive land management practices and to ensure the viability of farming and crofting communities.