

McCracken, D. 2019 Don't do woolly thinking, collect the data and act. *Press & Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2020. <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-press-and-journal-inverness-highlands-and-islands/20200106/282308207032422>

## **Don't do woolly thinking, collect the data and act**

My team and I are regularly talking to hill farmers and crofters at events both on and off the farms.

And we are constantly emphasising the need to collect data to make best use of the opportunities and innovations we are demonstrating on the farms.

Although the term 'data' sends shivers up many folks spines, it actually refers to a wide range of metrics that should be familiar to hill farmer and crofters.



Things such as soil pH and nutrient status, grass growth and fodder quality, livestock performance and health, and soil temperature and moisture content.

These metrics can be obtained in a variety of ways – from simply writing things down in a notebook through to employing 'fancy' sensors to collect information automatically from livestock or the land they are grazing.

But irrespective of how the data is collected, simply having that data is not enough.

It is also essential to look at and interpret what the data is indicating. And even more importantly, to then act on that information and, if necessary, change something on the farm or croft.

Or to put it another way. Without such data, how can individual hill farmers and crofters know how cost-effective their management is currently, what benefits are arising from changes in farming practices they have implemented, or how their farms and crofts are performing environmentally?

Indeed the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis will have major impacts on how hill farming and crofting continues to be supported going forward.

In particular, government and agencies will be looking for hill farmers and crofters to have a better understanding of their environmental footprint.

Not only in terms of how this can be reduced by taking actions to lower greenhouse gas emissions through more cost-effective management of livestock and fertilisers.

But also in terms of quantifying the vital role that management of their hill farms and crofts plays in improving biodiversity, helping to sequester carbon in peatlands and woodlands and preventing flooding in the lowlands.

There is a huge opportunity for hill farmers and crofters to be rewarded from public funds in the future for undertaking management on their farms and crofts to deliver such public goods.

But the use of more data collected at the individual hill farm or croft level will be essential to provide the evidence that the desired outcomes are actually being delivered.

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