Donnie Maclean

Donald Maclean, a past president of the SCU and chairman of the SCF board, passed away recently as a result of a health problem which had troubled him for some time.

Donnie, as he was always known, trained as an electrician in a Glasgow shipyard before returning to his native Stornoway to employment with the then North of Scotland Hydro Electric Board, a job from which he took early retirement to allow him to devote more time to his many other interests, chief of which was, of course, crofting.

He joined the Scottish Crofters Union when it was set up in 1986 and served as branch and area chair, council member, vice-president and president. As chairman of the board of the Scottish Crofting Foundation, Donnie oversaw the transition from SCU to SCF, which was followed by a troubled period in the history of the organisation.

Donnie stood down as chairman at the end of his term in 2003.

Donnie was also a director of Heather Isle Meats and Lewis and Harris Auction Mart, president of the West Side Agricultural Show and chairman of two local grazing committees – truly a man of many talents.

I first got to know Donnie when he joined the SCU council and we became close friends, a friendship which lasted over the years. Donnie and I were closely involved during my own spell in office with the union and then the foundation and I enjoyed the hospitality of his home on many occasions when visiting the Western Isles on official duties. I benefited greatly from his generous and valuable support as my vice-president during this time.

Donnie was at all times a gentleman and friend and his passing will be mourned by all those who had the good fortune to know him; indeed the wider crofting community will be all the poorer for his passing.

Alistair Macleod

Visitors from Papua

Government officials from the Indonesian province of Papua visited crofting townships on Eigg and on Skye this summer to learn more about community development and land reform in a devolved Scotland.

The twelve delegates, led by Alex Rumaseb, head of Papua’s provincial planning office, were taken to Eigg and Camuscross in Sleat by Alistair McIntosh and colleagues at the Centre for Human Ecology to look at the way bottom-up development can empower communities.

Papua, on the Indonesian side of New Guinea island, is one of the last great frontier wildernesses. Its vast rainforests and coral-rich waters are home to more than 250 indigenous tribes, the most linguistically diverse population on Earth. Yet standards of health and education for indigenous Papuans are often below the national average. Rampant logging, legal and illegal, has decimated swathes of primary forest and many communities are now selling their land to palm oil companies – sometimes at a very low price – leaving them bereft of the ecosystems that sustain them.

Papuan provincial government planners are concerned about the implications of people losing their connection to the land and their culture through development of the cash economy. They wanted to understand how people in the Scottish Highlands are keeping or reclaiming that connection. Alex Rumaseb said: “We like the idea of soil, soul and society working together. We want this to inform our 100 year plan for a healthy, happy Papua province.”

Papua province faces a situation where two-thirds of the population are made up of incomers, many of whom were sent over when Indonesia was a military dictatorship. Alistair McIntosh said: “This delegation was made up of both incomers and indigenous Papuans. They especially valued seeing on Eigg and in Camuscross on Skye how different communities can come to respect each other and make a common future. The Scots also learned a lot from their experience as they strive to develop a more democratic system than the one they have had.”

The Papua delegation reported that they are seeing growing signs of climate change in Indonesia. They therefore wanted to understand more about climate change. They were very impressed by Eigg’s award-winning green electrical grid, and were particularly interested in the solar and hydro components of the system.

As much of Papua’s rainforest is actually owned by the indigenous population in a system based on ancient customs of ancestral tenure, the delegation also wanted to know how crofting and community trusts benefit the local community. On Eigg they met Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust secretary Maggie Fyffe, local grazings clerk Neil Robertson and Camille Dresler, local historian and social enterprise tutor.

On Skye they met Susan Walker, from the Crofting Commission and members of Iomairt Chamas Chros is Duidisdell – the Camuscross and Duisdale Initiative. Best of all, they watched a communal potato planting at Camuscross and could not get over the fact that the tractor was driven by SCF member Gavin Parsons, who is a lecturer at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

On the last day of their trip to the west Highlands they visited the SCF team in Kyle and met Neil Gerrard, development manager at Highlands and Islands Enterprise’s Growing Community Assets team (what used to be called the Community Land Unit), before travelling to Gowan in Glasgow. There they were studying urban poverty and the work of the GaiaGael Trust which was started by the late Colin Macleod, whose father is from Gravir on Lewis.

The Papua group with some Eigg residents lain MacKinnon SCF and Alistair McIntosh on front row second and third from the left.