Dear Phyl,

I write to you in both your capacities at Trust and Community Council and seek that you discuss this with your fellow Islanders in both bodies and in the community.  I hope that if the bodies you sit on respond, that the members of each may provide practical and vocal support to end this pointless self-destruction of the Island by Islanders.

I have not been on Tiree over winter, but I have had credible reports of substantial illegal commercial sand and gravel extraction on Tiree shores and beaches.  This is not new, but I understand the theft this year is again out of hand.  Neither is it new for very few people to note it now and then for many to grumble in spring and summer at the winter damage that they watched happening without comment or challenge.

This suspected theft and self-destruction of a universal resource in beach sand and gravel is allegedly openly taking place for commercial gain when alternative legal options are readily available.  Times are tough financially, but this is not a new phenomenon and it seems the roots are deeper than the current economic strain.  What is a local custom permitted by Argyll Estates for farmers and crofters on a de minimus basis, has grown as machinery has improved and as a few with permission may have “accidentally” taken more than the de minimus amount and others, without permission have allegedly decided to take “their share” too.  Reports also indicate that it is the wealthier residents that are taking, and taking receipt of, the excess material, so the reasons for this may not always be need, but perhaps greed.

Alarmingly, this over-extraction and illegal removal may have become culturally accepted on Tiree now and this puts at risk the respectful de minimus use that has been successfully used sustainably utilised by many to help marginal agricultural practices for generations.  The de minimus amount is not defined; but it should be occasional, on small scale and it is for personal use, not re-sale.  I do not witness similar abuse of the land elsewhere across the mainland or other Argyll Estates islands.  I understand that some of the removal takes place under the cover of darkness, but the effects and the perpetrators seem to be obvious to those prepared to look, see and speak.  There are very few brave enough to say anything.  I completely understand that in a small closely linked community that it can be difficult to speak out, but with Tiree’s very structure, beauty and tourism at risk, is it not time to discuss it openly on Island while there is still time to save it?

In assessing those responsible, I specifically include those who turn a blind eye in that category.  Silence and/or indifference is the green-light that the illegal and over-exploitative perpetrators require.

Those taking it commercially in scale for re-sale can only do so where there is a ready local market for the pilfered goods.  I understand while a very few may take a large quantity, others receive or buy a small amount and therefore possibly think “what part does my small quantity (of stolen goods) play in the big scheme (of the overall theft)?” Perhaps there is a genuine lack of appreciation that this is illegal and damaging.  Whatever the thought process, when combined by the turning of a blind eye by so many others, including government organisations and other organisations who have a duty to challenge this but do not, this seem to be part of the reason why this tide of theft and self-destruction repeats regularly and appears to be unstoppable; at least until a tragedy occurs.  After years of fruitless communication with many who could or should be involved, I realise that I cannot save Tiree’s beaches on my own.  I know many others are concerned and care deeply but doing so silently is inexorably aiding Tiree’s environmental destruction.

I am quite exasperated by it all.  I request a statement on the position of Tiree Community Development Trust and Tiree Community Council in finding a solution to protect Tiree from this existential threat to the shores which define the Island, provide a refuge for wildlife, offer a wonderful resource for all to freely enjoy and also act as Tiree’s buffer to the Atlantic storms.  When a big storm event does hit illegally weakened beach protection, what will be the cost?  Might there be a cost in human lives?  Imagine the financial cost and disruption of bringing the equivalent tonnage in from the mainland to replace the lost natural protection and to repair damage to other property and infrastructure?

Tiree is a wonderful place where doors need not be locked and there is a huge degree of mutual trust and respect in the community.  It sits as quite a juxtaposition then to have our shorelines robbed, depleting them and so the Island itself in every respect.  To paraphrase Edmund Burke ”the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing”.

I look forward to hearing from both Tiree Community Development Trust and Tiree Community Council.

I hope you have both a good turnout and fruitful meeting tonight.

Kind regards

Hugh A Nicol MRICS

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Argyll Estates