

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

M.Sc. in Environment, Politics and Society

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Date: 16/08/2025

Forging a Homeland: A Socio-Ecological Study of Community Land Ownership in Scotland



Image of the Isle of Eigg. Taken during fieldwork by researcher.

Candidate number: MKCB4

September 2025

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*This research dissertation is submitted for the MSc in Environment, Politics and Society at University
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Abstract

The current ecological crisis is increasingly framed as a crisis of relationship, rooted in a Western conception of land that enables resource degradation, social exclusion, and the commodification of nature. Addressing this socio-ecological disconnect must therefore directly challenge these dominant conceptualisations of land and its governance. While the power of private ownership makes such a challenge difficult in most Western contexts, Scotland's progressive land reform legislation has created a framework for one: community ownership. This unique context raises a crucial question: Does this shift in ownership actually change people's relationships with the land? Influenced by ethnographic approaches, this dissertation investigates this question through an exploration of the lived socio-ecological outcomes of community ownership across three distinct Scottish contexts - the Isle of Eigg, Evanton Community Wood, and the Langholm Initiative.

The findings reveal that the lived realities of community ownership are shaped less by the legal title itself and more by the pre-existing material conditions of the buyout process, the place, and personal histories of its residents. The research identifies that the day-to-day work of stewardship - the 'mundane responsibilities' of maintenance and governance - is a central, formative process. While a source of significant strain, this forced interdependence is also the primary mechanism through which a powerful collective identity is forged. However, the research also warns against romanticising community ownership models, as they neither guarantee ecological stability nor offer protection from the politicisation and pressures of the modern world. Ultimately, it's argued that the socio-ecological potential of community ownership lies not in the property transfer, but in the devolved responsibility for the land. This process brings the abstract scale of the ecological crisis down to the tangible work of local stewardship, cultivating a lived connection to the land and preparing future custodians of a place they can call 'home'.

Word Count

11,963

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and generosity of many people. First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Eszter Kovacs. Her encouragement and unwavering support have been invaluable throughout this entire process. It has been a privilege to discuss and listen to her expertise, as she encouraged me to think more deeply about my research and continue to bring passion and excitement into my project.

The heart of this dissertation lies with the people of the Isle of Eigg, Evanton Community Wood, and the Langholm Initiative. I am profoundly grateful to every individual who welcomed me into their communities, their homes, and their lives. This research is built upon the stories they so generously shared. Thank you for your time and for trusting me with your experiences. Your voices are the foundation of this work, and I hope I have done them justice.

I am also indebted to Alastair McIntosh, whose book *Soil and Soul* was a profound source of inspiration and helped shape my commitment to this research. Our conversation and his guidance was crucial for designing a project that puts communities first.

Finally, I wish to thank my friends and family for their endless patience and support. A special thank you must go to my housemate, whose constant encouragement (and countless debates) kept me going through the most challenging moments.

‘Dàimh leis an tìr’

(Relationship with the land)

Acronyms

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CRtB	Community Right to Buy
DTAS	Development Trusts Association Scotland
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SNP	Scottish National Party
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

Land is the stage upon which human life has unfolded. It is foundational for the individual on the subsistence family farm, an investment for the wealthy urban dweller, and an arena for geopolitical happenings around the globe (Marshall, 2016). In the context of the climate crisis, its role is twofold: as a key constituent of the problem and an essential part of the solution. Research has suggested that over one-third of the planet's land surfaces have been transformed by human development (Winkler et al., 2021). Much of this comes from the global food system, which alone accounts for 23% of total anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (Jia et al., 2019). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Special Report on Climate Change and Land consequently recognises land as a central component to the climate challenge, and deleterious anthropogenic land-uses (Chase et al., 2000; Zhao et al., 2001; Marland et al., 2003; Foley et al., 2005) are predicted to be a major component of ecological collapse over the next century (Feddema et al., 2005; IPCC, 2019). Therefore, solving this problem is increasingly argued to be a socio-ecological endeavour - acknowledging people and nature as inextricably linked systems to address the entwined role land plays in our social, economic, and political lives (Hossain et al., 2024; Le Tourneau et al., 2024). It must recognise that societies and cultures are profoundly influenced by the physical landscapes they inhabit even as they actively mould and transform those environments.

This means land differs from any other resource, for the meaning ascribed to it is neither objective nor universal. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) provides a comprehensive starting point, defining land as 'the terrestrial bio-productive system that comprises soil, vegetation, other biota, and the ecological and hydrological processes that operate within the system' (UNCCD, 2017, p.21). Far from being just a geographical space, its meaning and value can shift dramatically based on one's culture, wealth, or degree of direct dependence on it for survival (Sauer, 2012; Bender, 2024). This cultural filtering of meaning demonstrates why any universal approach to land management is unsuitable, as it disregards such nuances. Land also suffers from a 'bounded...limited quality' (UNCCD, 2017, p.21). By having a finite, yet essential, characteristic, land has a centrality in human history as not only a resource of high economic value, but as one 'worth fighting for' (Pearce, 2012). This means people can have strong *emotional* connections to land, particularly in Indigenous cosmologies whose knowledge is encoded in cultural narratives intrinsically tied to specific places (Kimmerer, 2013). The essential role land therefore plays in a group's identity has made the act of *owning* it an exercise of power (Hall, 2013). Whether conceptualised as a sacred entity, a communal resource, or a private commodity, the decision is political. It determines who

holds power, who has access, and whose worldview is validated (Shipton and Goheen, 1992; Hayes, 2020).

These complications sit at the very heart of sustainable landed relations. Dominant models of land governance have been monolithically bound to the Western model of individual private property (Home, 2021; Fox, 2024). C.B Macpherson (1978, p.3) articulates that land in this framework goes beyond physical possession, into ownership, which is an 'enforceable claim' that is upheld by the power of society or the state. This has validated numerous state-led and private approaches to land governance, which have continuously suffered from asymmetrical power relations, commodification of natural resources, and exclusionary neoliberal governance arrangements that often result in social exclusion and poor ecological outcomes (Alvarado, 2019; Adams, 2020; Buchadas, 2022). This raises serious questions about not only top-down, exclusionary models of ownership but also the assumptions surrounding the socio-ecological relationships embedded within these Western forms of land tenure (Logan and Wekerle, 2008). Since the 1980s, a rise in 'conservation with people' has tried to depict conservation arrangements as a way to both enhance human social well-being and sustain biodiversity (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Brockington, 2015; Galvin et al., 2018). These community-based initiatives are designed to 'co-opt the managerial capacities of the uncaptured peasantry' (Murphree, 2000), laying the groundwork for customary users to reclaim the land and its resources on their own terms (Kelly and Peluso, 2015). As such, community involvement in land management has become increasingly recognised as a critical variable for adaptive capacity in the context of the climate emergency (Quan and Dyer, 2008; McNamara and Buggy, 2017; Castro and Kuntz, 2022). Yet, any meaningful engagement in the escalating ecological crisis must go beyond community *participation*. It should not only challenge the Western assumption that individual, titled ownership is the default or only legitimate form of land governance, but also centralise communities' landed socio-ecological relationship in its efforts to build more equitable and sustainable alternatives.

As a result, this research explores community ownership as a means of achieving more sustainable land relations. Underpinned by the notion of collective responsibility, it theoretically localises autonomy and resource management to the community of place (Varghese et al., 2006). Many figures have championed local resource management as a sustainable alternative to prescribed top-down approaches (Ostrom, 1990). However, land's contextual nature means any true evaluation requires a nuanced understanding of the geography, history, and society of place (Varghese et al., 2006). These intricacies suggest that while community ownership has become increasingly popular within property and the realm of economic assets (Hobson et al., 2019; Alden Wily, 2018), it fails to receive the same attention within land and climate discussions. This is particularly pertinent within

Western contexts where land is highly economically valued, politically sensitive, and boasts a complex history (Hayes, 2020). So while this approach has emerged in certain global contexts (Bassett and Jacobs, 1997; Barnes, 2009; Barboza De Las Casas, 2023; Algoed and Ribeiro, 2025), community land ownership in the West has struggled to reach outside the realm of the discursive. This is majorly true if not for one location, Scotland. Emboldened by historic land injustices and radical land reform, Scotland stands alone as one of the few western contexts in which community land ownership has been immortalised within a legislative framework (Table 1).

Feature	Scotland	England & Wales	USA/Canada	New Zealand <i>Maori Land</i>
Primary Legislative Basis	Land Reform Acts (2003, 2015, 2016)	Localism Act 2011	General property and corporate law, no national acquisition framework.	Te Ture Whenua Māori Act 1993
Core Legal Mechanism	Statutory pre-emptive and compulsory rights to buy	A 'Community Right to Bid.' <i>This is not a right to buy.</i>	No statutory right to acquire land. The model is simply a legal structure once land is acquired through market means.	Protection and administration of existing Indigenous land titles
Source of Right	A state-conferred power for communities to directly intervene in the private land market, overriding standard property rights in the public interest.	A procedural delay granted by the state to give communities a window of opportunity to organise and prepare a bid.	A civil society initiative. The right to own land is derived from participating in the market, not from a special state power.	The recognition of inherent, pre-existing Indigenous and treaty rights
Power of Compulsion	Yes: The framework includes multiple avenues for compulsory purchase.	No: The owner is under no obligation to sell to the community, even if the community makes an offer.	No: The model has no power of compulsion and relies entirely on voluntary, market-based transactions	No: The framework is designed to prevent the forced alienation of Māori land, not to compel the acquisition of new land.

Table 1: Examples of Land Reform legislation across four Western contexts. All information is found from the following pieces of legislation: Scotland - Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, England/Wales - Localism Act 2011 (Part 5, Chapter 3), USA/Canada – No direct land reform legislation, and New Zealand - Te Ture Whenua Māori Act 1993 (own creation)

The Community Right to Buy legislation¹ that has facilitated community land ownership was introduced through Scotland’s devolved parliament in 2003 (Land Reform [Scotland] Act, 2003). Since then, land under community governance has increased nearly 10-fold (Scottish Government, 2024a).

1. Otherwise known as ‘Community Buy-Outs’

Despite this material increase, a significant gap remains in our understanding of its lived reality, with few academic studies documenting the evolving relationship between communities and their land post-acquisition (Didham, 2007; Callaghan et al., 2011; Mc Morran et al., 2014). Thus, questions remain in the Scottish context as to how effective community land ownership is for socio-ecological sustainability? Do the communities work well together? To what extent does ownership change one's relationship to the land?

While this dissertation seeks to explore these practical questions, it recognises that providing definitive 'answers' is not its primary goal. Instead, this research finds value in Marx's theory of praxis and is grounded in the understanding that knowledge itself is a form of action (Marx, 1976). This research is not just an academic exercise, but a form of resistance that works by centralising and validating the local, lived experiences of Scottish communities – a foundational step in reconceptualising landed socio-ecological relationships. Therefore, this research will concentrate on the lived realities of three Scottish community buyouts to address the following research aim and subsequent questions:

What does the Scottish Community Buyout Model reveal about the promise of community ownership for transforming socio-ecological relationships?

- *How do the institutional processes and material realities of the Scottish community buyout model shape a community's lived experience of ownership?*
- *Through the analytical lenses of community, belonging, and conservation, how are socio-ecological relationships understood, enacted, and experienced within these community-owned landscapes?*

CHAPTER II: Literature Review

To structure the literature surrounding community land ownership, this review is organised into three sections. The first outlines the foundational logic of Western land relations and its exclusionary principles, to frame the context from which community ownership appears. Following this, the notion of community ownership is grounded within the specific historical and legislative context of Scotland. The final section identifies and analyses three key research themes - the governance of 'community', the role of belonging, and community-based conservation - highlighting them as critical points of empirical departure for examining socio-ecological relationships under community ownership in Scotland.

Naturally, literature on community land ownership extends beyond these three key themes. While looking outside these dimensions is important to a comprehensive understanding, this review cannot completely address every aspect of the field. Therefore, it purposefully concentrates on the three aforementioned areas as they are particularly relevant to the Scottish context and in understanding socio-ecological relationships.

II.1. Land as property

'There is nothing which so generally strikes the imagination...as the right of property; or that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims...in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe'

William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England (1765-9)

William Blackstone's 18th-century definition of property, as a right of 'despotic dominion' based on 'total exclusion', provides the foundational logic for land relations in much of the Western world. This exclusionary legal and philosophical framework is now implicated in our contemporary ecological crisis, which Wise et al. (2023) suggest has led to a 'crisis of relationship'. The crisis is seen to be rooted in the bifurcation of 'human' and 'nature' into distinct categories (Quinn, 1999; Bay and Karagöz, 2025), a split that allows for the objectification and commodification of the natural world. Consequently, any attempt at ecological redemption must begin with landed relationships and the systems of separation embedded within its ownership.

This Western concept of property as exclusive dominion did not emerge in a vacuum. The Enlightenment marks a key turning point, where the pursuit of scientific knowledge in 'exotic' corners of the globe began to frame 'natural' landscapes as sublime wildernesses defined by the absence of humans (Humboldt, 1850; Pratt, 2007; Wulf, 2015). This conceptual separation of the socio-ecological (Vining et al., 2008), coupled with a romanticised colonial drive for dominion, objectified the land, turning it into a desirable asset. Spurred on by the materiality of colonialism and industrialisation, land became a primary tool of power and economic prowess (Locke, 1690; Gates, 1965; Wolfe, 2006). By the 19th Century, ownership became the ultimate Western expression of status, a principle embodied by the aristocratic landowners who dominated institutions like the British Parliament. The ability to own land - and, crucially, to exclude others from it - was a direct manifestation of power, for the lords of the land were also the lords of the law (Hayes, 2020).

However, a powerful counter-narrative has emerged in both academia and policy. As scholarship attempts to look beyond Eurocentric conceptualisations of nature (Davis, 2009; Kimmerer, 2013; Yunkaporta, 2020), Indigenous knowledge in particular has offered alternative socio-ecological understandings that centre land not on separation and exclusion, but on reciprocity, kinship, and stewardship (Abram, 1996). With calls for the 'right to land' to become a human right (Claeys, 2015) and global bodies now recognising that secure land tenure is a precondition for ecological restoration (UNCCD, 2022), a new foundation for land reform is being laid, aimed at reconciling these historical power structures (IUCN, 2022).

Yet, translating these new understandings into meaningful change presents a profound challenge. Landed power remains concentrated in the hands of a few, meaning reform efforts often remain superficial and neglect embedded power structures (Home and Kabata, 2018). Instead of systemic change, many initiatives opt for tokenistic redistribution into private smallholdings (Borras, 2007; Ramutsindela and Hartnack, 2019) or the transfer of local assets without addressing the underlying inequalities (Hobson et al., 2019)

It is within this context that the model of 'Community Land Ownership', championed by Robert Swann (1972), offers promise. Shown in some cases to have hopeful results (Williams, 2018), it emphasises permanent community stewardship and directly challenges the Blackstone property ideal of exclusive, individual dominion. However, the inherent complexities of land mean that in most of the Western world, the model remains more of a promising concept than a fully realised practice (Sumner and Hughes, 2024) - with one notable exception: Scotland.

II.2. The Scottish Context

For Scotland, land reform is as much a question of geography as it is of history (McCrone, 1997).

‘Calling for the democratisation of Scotland concerns itself with ‘land’ which is so fundamentally part of our national identity’ (David McCrone at the 1997 John McEwen Memorial Lecture)

As seen in *Figure 1*, Scotland has one of the most uneven patterns of land ownership in the Western world, an imbalance that has persisted for over 500 years (BBC News, 2019a). It is so extreme that it fails to meet the criteria set by international agencies for equitable land distribution in the Global South (Wightman, 1996). This concentration of ownership dates back to the reign of James I, who, under a feudal system, granted vast estates to loyal supporters. Passed down through generations, this ownership structure has made it difficult to determine exactly 'who owns Scotland'. Attempts by the Scottish government in 2019 to map land ownership by 2024 fell short, registering only a third of the country's landmass (BBC News, 2019a). Instead, Andy Wightman (a private citizen) has cemented himself as the leading authority in this field through his land ownership database (see *Figure 2*), reporting various figures: 1,252 individuals own two-thirds of the privately owned rural land in Scotland (Wightman, 2013); 433 landowners own 50% and 2,877 own 70% of privately owned rural land (Wightman, 2024).

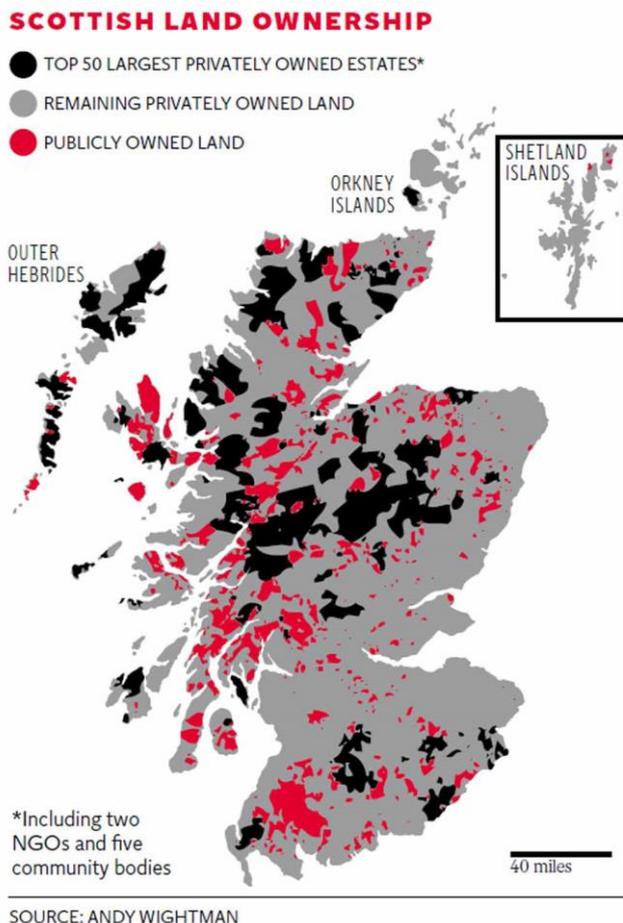


Figure 1: Map of private and publicly owned land in Scotland. Publicly owned land *does not* refer to community-owned land. Note that the difficulty in quantitatively mapping Scotland's land ownership ensures that a cohesive and detailed community ownership land map of Scotland is difficult to produce and subsequently hard to find. (Retrieved from Judah 2015; however the original data comes from Andy Wightman's database)

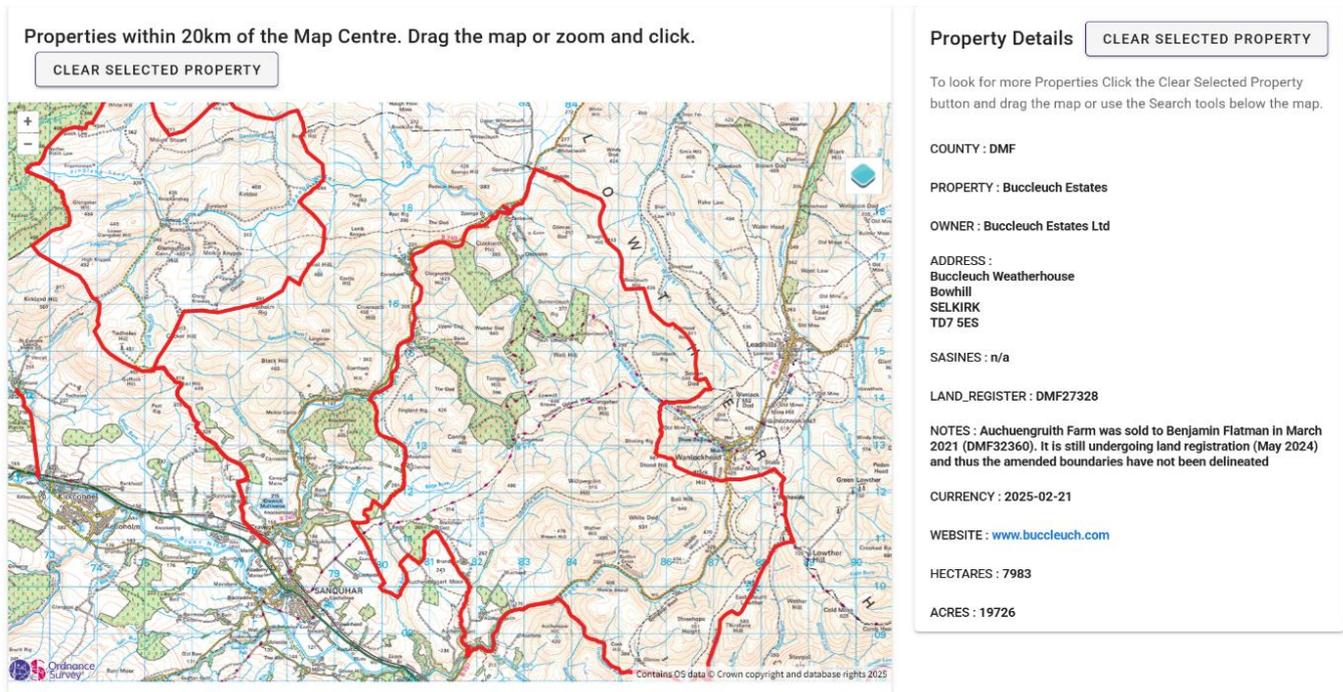


Figure 2: Screenshot of Andy Wightman's 'Who Owns Scotland' database when searching for *Buccleuch Estate*. Figure includes visualised map (on left side) and property data (on right side) collated by the author and associates (Who Owns Scotland, 2025).

The fact is ownership remains difficult to map, as many of these landowners are absentee proprietors who rarely set foot on their estates (Sellar, 2006). In numerous cases, ownership is obscured by international financial structures, in which estates are held through trusts in Liechtenstein, banks in Sweden, or companies registered in the Bahamas (Sellar, 2006). Yet the significance of Scottish land concentration extends far beyond material possession; it is deeply embedded in the collective memory and identity of its people, shaped most profoundly by the trauma of the Highland Clearances (Richards, 2000). During the 18th and 19th centuries, thousands of crofters (small-scale tenant farmers) were forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands as aristocratic landowners consolidated estates for large-scale sheep farming (Richards, 2000). The consequences were not merely physical (starvation, displacement, and death); it severed the bonds of heritage and place that had defined Highland society for centuries (Meighan, 2022). Central to this traditional relationship was the Gaelic concept of *dùthchas*. Far more than the Enlightenment-derived notions of land as a commodified resource (Locke, 1689), land was understood as a conduit for cultural heritage and collective identity, with communities holding an inalienable hereditary right to inhabit and nurture their ancestral clan territories (Dziadowiec, 2024). The crofting system, rooted in *dùthchas*, thus represented a lived expression of these values (Meighan, 2022); a legacy so frequently revisited in contemporary Scottish publications, plays (McGrath, 1974), poetry (MacLean, 1999; Scott, 2017), and literature (Prebble, 1969; Hunter, 2018) that it is evident modern land reform in Scotland is motivated not only by the need to address material inequalities, but to reclaim a sense of cultural identity tied to the land.

Over the next two centuries, a series of land reforms, particularly those securing crofters' rights to tenure (Crofting Reform [Scotland] Act, 1976), laid the foundation for the wave of modern 'community buy-outs' that began in the Highlands and Islands in 1993². Supported by both public and private funding, and bolstered by the establishment of the Scottish Land Fund in 2001, rural communities began to regain ownership of their lands. While not without controversy, these purchases became firmly established with the Land Reform Act of 2003 (Land Reform [Scotland] Act, 2003). Among other legislation, the now devolved Scottish government introduced the community-right-to-buy (CRTB), which granted eligible communities, of up to 10,000 persons, the first right of refusal when land was put up for sale or transferred (Hoffman, 2013) (See Appendix IX). It's important to note that, beyond following proper procedures, government approval for these buyouts depends on clear criteria: the purchase must promote sustainable development and demonstrably benefit the wider community (Brown, 1997). Communities have gained significant help through the establishment of the Scottish Land Commission in 2017 - a government-funded body dedicated to championing community ownership and reforming land rights and markets. As of December 2023, there are 840 assets in community ownership across Scotland, up from 85 in 2000 (Scottish Government, 2024a).

Scotland is often depicted as a 'wilderness', a perception shaped in part by problematic historical narratives about its people and land ownership (McCrone, 1997). Yet, its landscapes support around 90,000 species - many of international significance (Scottish Government, 2024b). Despite this richness, Scottish biodiversity has steadily declined since national records began (State of Nature Partnership, 2023, p.4), largely due to intensive agriculture and inappropriate development (State of Nature Partnership, 2023). Reports commissioned by the former Green-SNP coalition highlighted the positive impact of community in conservation initiatives (State of Nature Partnership, 2023, p.31). In response, the Scottish government has made nature protection central to community land reform - as outlined in its Biodiversity Delivery Plan (2024–2030), which aims to strengthen the connection between communities and nature (Scottish Government, 2024b). Aligned with Agrawal's (2005) concept of 'environmentality', Scotland's land reform can be seen as a devolution of environmental responsibility, where new institutional arrangements also strengthen environmental identities through participatory governance. However, the complexity and standardised nature of the buyout process privileges communities with bureaucratic expertise such as accounting and law (DTAS, 2012; Mulholland et al., 2015; Sharma, 2023). Moreover, as public funding decreases, the central state often acts as the primary gatekeeper for financial support. This position allows it to set eligibility criteria that can co-opt community groups into delivering services previously provided by local

2. Assynt in 1993, Isle of Eigg in 1997, Knoydart in 1999 and the Isle of Gigha in 2002. These are places where heritage identity had remained particularly strong.

authorities (Sharma, 2023). Thus, while ownership may foster environmental subjectivities, it can marginalise traditional community skills and bottom-up forms of resistance (Scott, 1985), reducing participation to administrative compliance rather than organic engagement with the land (Meade, 2005; Shaw, 2017).

In the academic literature, considerable attention has been paid to the entrepreneurialism of community landowners (Callaghan et al., 2012). Research has consistently highlighted how communities generate income through various means (Callaghan et al., 2011; Haugh, 2022; Bosworth et al., 2025), with a particular focus on tourism's role in their economic strategies (McMorran et al., 2018; Macaulay, 2023), as the buyouts attract growing public interest. But sufficient capital remains a concern, as in its absence is a collapse of buyout projects altogether (BBC News, 2024). Public funding for the purchase itself is crucial, but its allocation often depends on communities meeting specific technical and procedural criteria, suggesting this could shape their practices and identities (Dinnie and Holstead, 2018). This centrally administered process fosters an 'institutional Darwinism' (Creamer, 2015), where the state dictates funding priorities and recipients. These funding constraints have pushed communities to partner with carbon brokers or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), exchanging natural assets and management rights for grants tied to carbon credits or renewable energy projects (Sharma et al., 2023). Scotland's attractiveness to external investors seeking to 'green' their portfolios has therefore driven up land prices, often pricing communities out of buyout initiatives (Hollingdale, 2022). With minimal checks on competence and legality for private investors (Hollingdale, 2022), the system risks favouring these land purchases while communities increasingly face stringent requirements to prove their capacity and outline future management plans. Do these state-led, market-driven pressures threaten to co-opt the movement's transformative grassroots potential? Understanding, therefore, whether genuine socio-ecological change is possible requires a critical examination of the very concept at the heart of the model: the 'community' itself.

II.3. Community

The vision of 'community' is an attractive one, central to the appeal of community ownership, yet its definition is notoriously complex and contested (Delanty, 2010). Scholars often depict community in one of two ways: as a simple spatial unit or as a social entity defined by a set of shared norms (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). The appeal of Scottish community ownership partly stems from the first definition, the notion that a fixed, territorial community is best placed to manage local resources, as its proximity fosters deep, localised knowledge – improving the socio-ecological connection (Linnell,

2005). However, this simplistic geographical view is widely challenged in the literature. In practice, communities are not monolithic blocs but are internally diverse and stratified by gender, class, age, and power relations, leading to conflicting interests and aspirations (Gusfield, 1978; Redford, 1992; Leach et al., 1999). These internal divisions can lead to powerful individuals or subgroups acting selfishly, effectively silencing or excluding others from decision-making, even within the same geographical space (Brooks et al., 2012; Danson and Burnett, 2021). Furthermore, the idea of a purely autonomous, place-based community is often an illusion. Broader governance structures, external agencies, and intrusive market forces mean that ultimate control may not reside with those living within the physical boundaries of the land in question (Barton, 2000; Barrow and Murphree, 2001; Bryden and Geisler, 2007). Therefore, the assumption that geographical proximity automatically ensures social cohesion and sound resource management should be treated with caution.

Given these limitations, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest it is more useful to understand communities and their actions through a relational lens, focusing on the networks and learning that facilitate collective action (Figure 3).

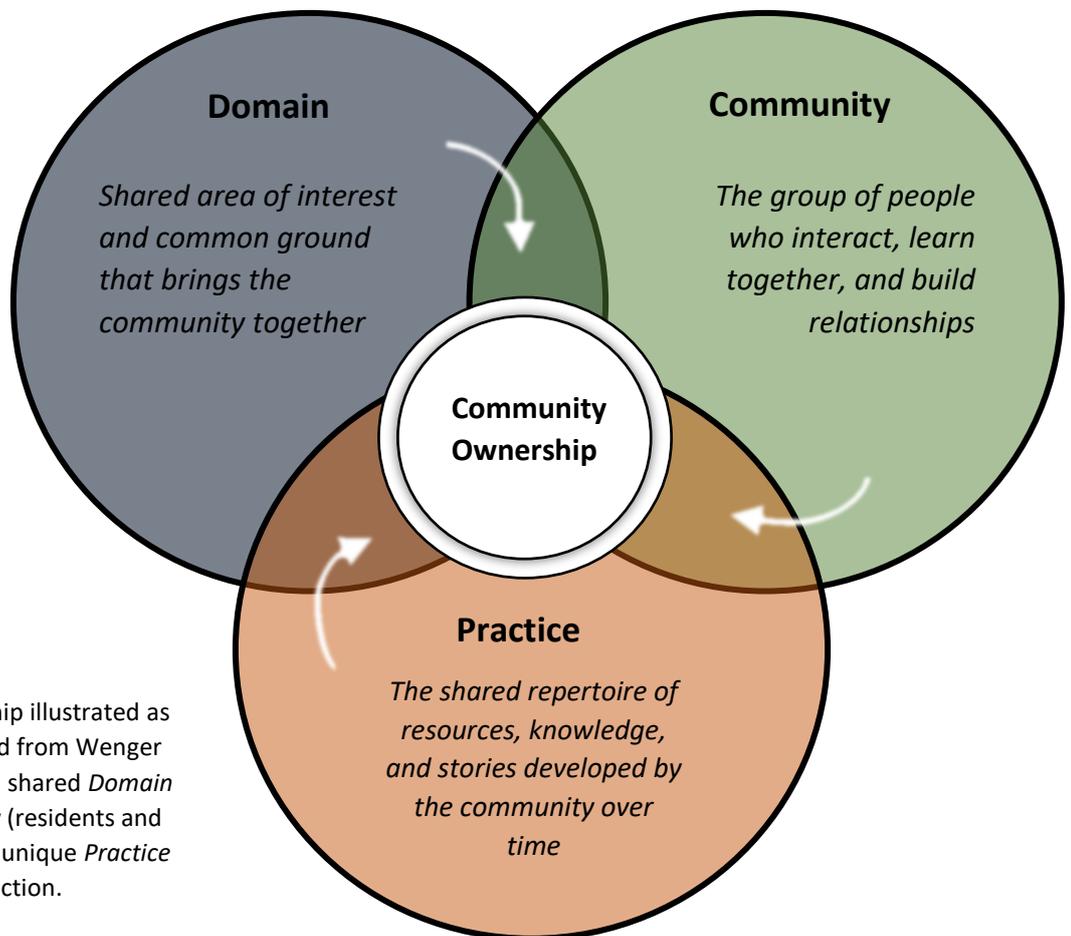


Figure 3: Community land ownership illustrated as a 'Community of Practice', adapted from Wenger (1998). The model illustrates how a shared *Domain* (stewardship) unites a *Community* (residents and volunteers), who in turn develop a unique *Practice* through their collective action.

This understanding of social cohesion sits synonymously with Putnam's influential concept of social capital, which he defines as '*the features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions*' (Putnam, 1993, p.167). High social capital is linked to greater civic engagement, reduced transaction costs, and effective resolutions of collective action problems (Fukuyama, 1995; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000; Lin, 2001; Paxton, 2002; Welzel et al., 2005). In the context of Scottish community buyouts, a healthy stock of social capital is often implicitly assumed to be the engine that enables successful self-governance. Yet, like the romanticised view of community itself, the presence of social capital cannot be taken for granted. Research consistently shows that an individual's community engagement is shaped by demographic factors, including their length of residence, education level, age, and sense of belonging (Ogunjinmi et al., 2022; Si et al., 2022; Chiyawa and Mzuza, 2022; Phonchaluen et al., 2023). Therefore, if community ownership devolves responsibility to the local level, could it leave communities vulnerable if they lack the pre-existing social cohesion to manage this new autonomy? Interestingly, research suggests that a shared struggle, in response to external pressures, can not only cultivate this social capital but also renew a sense of collective identity rooted in these shared practices and histories (Coser, 1956; Bryden and Geisler, 2007; Rennie and Billing, 2015). This implies that through the material realities of community governance, an abstract 'community' can be forged into a powerful, lived sense of belonging, making a critical analysis of *belonging* also essential to understanding the Scottish buyout model.

II.4. Belonging

Any investigation into socio-ecological relationships must interrogate the link between its people and places. The Gaelic concept of *dùthchas* in Scotland resonates powerfully with Indigenous knowledges, mirroring the idea that belonging emerges from enduring, place-based relationships (Yunkaporta, 2020; Brewer II and Johnson, 2023) and treating the land as kin or family (Kimmerer, 2013). In the context of this bond's historical rupture by the Highland Clearances, community ownership can be understood as a restorative act. It moves beyond mere repatriation to become a process of constructing belonging through the social practices, memories, and material interactions that define a community (Bennett, 2012). Dankulov et al. (2015) have shown that through these dynamic interactions, collective knowledge of place can emerge as a social value - a unifying force within communities that can strengthen belonging. Therefore, belonging under community ownership may be better understood as the embodied, felt practices of cohabitation and the material experiences of people and places (Brown et al., 2012), continually re-formed in the present

through memories (Kuhn, 2000; Blokland, 2001). This stands in contrast to more institutionalised forms of 'belonging', such as citizenship, which in Western contexts is often closely tied to legal frameworks and national borders (Sassen, 2002; Leuchter, 2014). Gustafson (2005), for instance, shows how in Sweden, debates over dual citizenship reveal assumptions that physical migration away from the homeland undermines one's national belonging - suggesting that even institutionalised belonging can be perceived as insufficient if not rooted in a continued physical connection to the land.

Understanding belonging as care, connection, and emotion has long been sidelined in academic discourse. Because of their historic ties to subjectivity and femininity, emotional bonds to land were often viewed as incompatible with dominant modes of rational governance (Haraway, 1988; Batavia et al., 2021). However, the emergence of feminist political ecology and emotional geographies has helped validate this aspect of community ownership; that a deep, emotional connection to a place is fundamental to its protection (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Davidson et al., 2012; Sultana, 2015). Research confirms that emotional bonds and past experiences heavily promote pro-environmental behaviours (Schultz, 2000; Schultz et al., 2004; Barragan-Jason et al., 2023). So while community ownership may anchor belonging through a legal recognition (Young, 2022; Ouakari, 2023), it could also engage the emotive and collective process of place-making. Fry (2023) suggests that it is through this 'emotional labour' that communities reclaim their heritage and assert a collective identity, which in turn fuels a commitment to the long-term ecological health of their place. However, if belonging is rooted in historical memory, who is considered a legitimate community member and who might be excluded? (Fanon, 1970; Geschiere, 2009; Tajfel and Turner, 2004). Scholarship has suggested that alternative behaviours, particularly early and sustained outdoor education, can foster future stewardship and advance belonging based not on who you were, but on what you contribute now (Lave and Wenger, 1991; McLeod et al., 2024). This suggests that inclusive community ownership models can build belonging on shared values and future goals, not just on historical experience (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

II.5. Conservation

Restoring land ownership to communities in Scotland is a direct application of a national and global shift towards more effective and equitable environmental protection. Since the 1980s, conservation practice has increasingly moved towards socially attuned and culturally situated approaches, broadly known as community-based conservation (Western et al., 1994; Brosius et al., 1998; Berkes, 2004). This movement was built on growing evidence that the local and traditional knowledge held by communities offered better ways to manage complex social-ecological problems (Berkes et al., 2000;

Brondízio et al., 2021; Sele and Mukundi, 2024). This fundamentally shattered Hardin’s pessimistic ‘tragedy of the commons’ narrative (1968), a challenge most powerfully articulated in Elinor Ostrom’s work. Ostrom (1990) was critical in demonstrating that communities can, and often do, create their own robust institutions to sustainably manage collective resources, providing a powerful theoretical justification for community ownership as a model for fostering more sustainable socio-ecological relations (see figure 4).

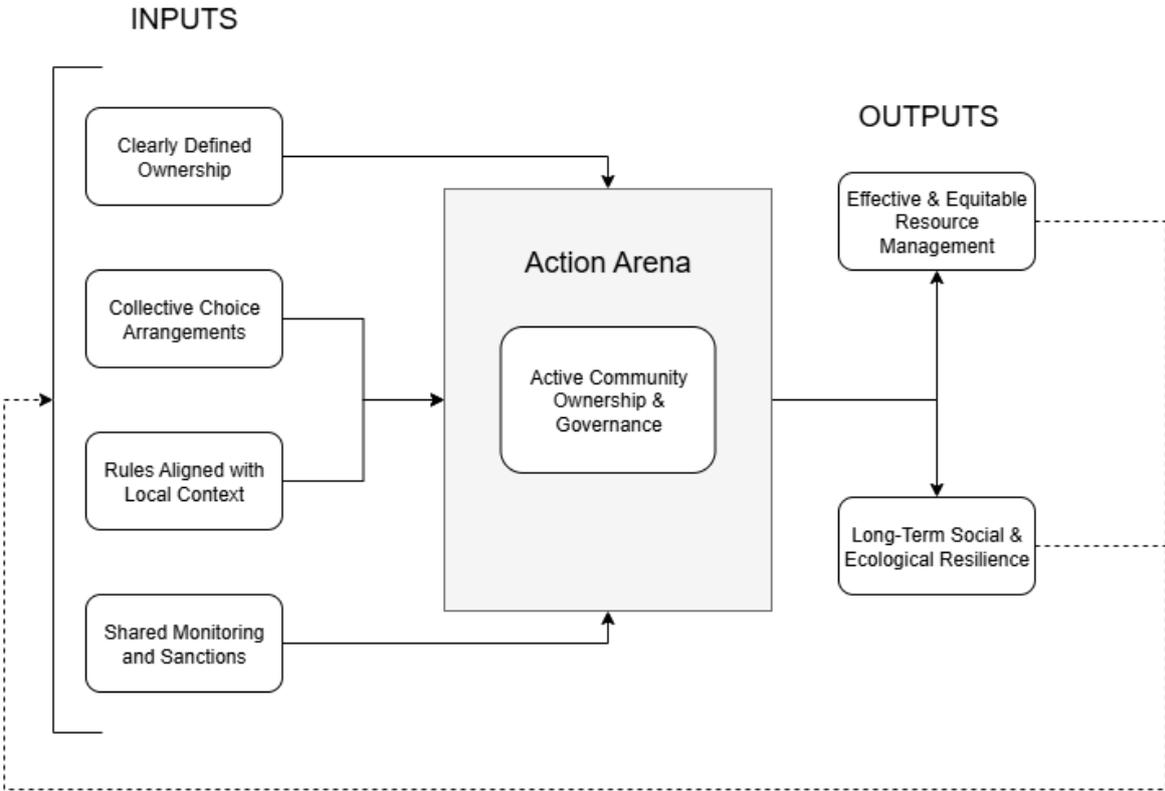


Figure 4: An adapted theoretical framework for community land governance, based on the institutional design principles for common-pool resource management developed by Ostrom (1990). The diagram illustrates how these core principles (inputs) enabled by a process of active community stewardship, can lead to desired socio-ecological outcomes (outputs).

However, applying this framework requires careful consideration of the specific local context. It is crucial not to romanticise community governance, particularly when comparing the Scottish model to contexts in the Global South where conservation is often a matter of immediate survival rather than long-term ecological restoration (Knutsson et al., 2024). This is particularly pertinent when we consider that community ownership does not protect against wider challenges such as climate change, which continues to be an uncontrollable, damaging factor for community-based initiatives (Carpenter, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2023). Care should be taken then, when investigating the

transformational capacity of communities to protect natural resources under Scottish community ownership, not least because social science research on self-governance often displays case selection bias, typically favouring surviving communities while overlooking those that have collapsed or disappeared (Barrett et al., 2001).

II.6. What's being offered?

As mentioned, any meaningful attempt to tackle the ecological crisis increasingly recognises the crucial role of people and land, a relationship explored within foundational socio-ecological models (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). However, current models of environmental governance and land ownership propagate notions of utility and commodification, leading to relationships that are inherently exploitative. Community ownership thus holds significant promise for transforming this relationship, and the recent history of Scottish buyouts offers a unique empirical context to explore this potential. It provides an opportunity to investigate the adaptive capacity of these socio-ecological relationships - the ability of a community, in this case through ownership, not just to respond to change, but to proactively influence and redefine its mutual relationship with the landed environment (Martin-Breen and Anderies, 2011; Barnes et al., 2017).

Despite this promise, critical gaps exist in the current research. While Scotland provides a rare Western context for legislated community ownership, much of the existing scholarship on these buyouts assesses ecological and social outcomes in isolation from one another (Miller et al., 2012; Burnett and Danson, 2016; Combe et al., 2020; Danson and Burnett, 2021). In addition, there remains a notable lack of empirical studies that document the lived experiences of communities and their evolving, integrated relationships with the land following ownership transitions. Therefore, although theoretical frameworks like Ostrom's (2009) have identified key principles for socio-ecological sustainability, a true understanding of community ownership's socio-ecological potential requires the very thing the literature currently lacks: a deep, qualitative consideration of the contextual histories, geographies, and people of a place.

CHAPTER III: Research Design

While the previous section identified a research gap, addressing it presents its own methodological challenges. Traditional academic research, often perceived as extractivist, has contributed to an understandable scepticism among communities, particularly those in Scotland with long histories of being studied by outsiders (Bain et al., 2022; Macaulay et al., 2023). In response, this dissertation adopts an ethical and engaged approach, one that is personally informed by the work of Alastair McIntosh. Interest was profoundly shaped by his book *Soil and Soul* and a subsequent conversation, which inspired a commitment to research which honours lived experience and seeks to understand social and ecological disconnection. To articulate this approach clearly, the following sections are structured using the layers of the Research Process Onion (Saunders et al., 2009) (Figure 5), ensuring a balance between academic rigour and context-sensitive flexibility (Melnikovas, 2018).

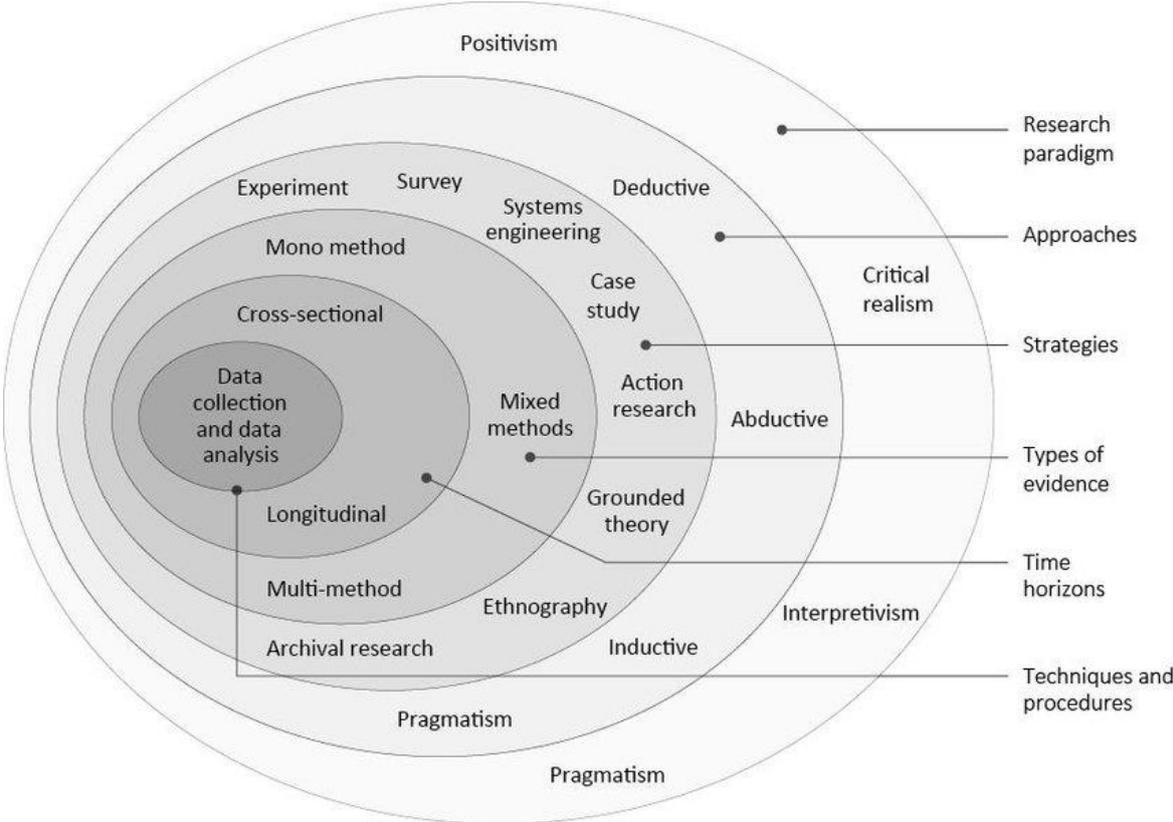


Figure 5: The research framework for this study: the 'Research Process Onion' model by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009).

III.1. Guiding the research

Researching communities is a sensitive process. Therefore, the current landscape of Scottish buy-outs was preliminarily reviewed through an analysis of recent academic literature and discussions with key individuals in the field (Macaulay et al., 2023). From this investigatory stage, it became clear that two factors were to be major determinants in guiding the methodological approach:

1. *Acknowledging the researcher's positionality*: This involved a critical awareness of the researcher's own background, perspectives, and assumptions when working with buy-out communities
2. *Prioritising equitable and meaningful engagement with communities*: This meant ensuring research methods were designed to respect and value community voices, foster trust, and avoid extractive or tokenistic practices.

Given these considerations, pragmatism was chosen as the guiding research paradigm. Its rejection of fixed ontological truths centres the need to capture the fluid and evolving experiences of communities (Bruce and Bloch, 2013). This ensures that local realities and community voices shape the research, rather than being subsumed under an external theoretical model. The second layer warrants an abductive approach, as the research draws on core themes as its initial theoretical lens, yet aims for a nuanced and contextually grounded account by using insights from the lived experiences of community members to interrogate and refine these ideas.

III.2. Data collection

Though adopting a qualitative approach, grounded in a case study exploration, helped contextualise and enrich the research, it raised concerns regarding appropriate access. Centralising trust is essential for successful community engagement (Di Napoli, 2019), particularly in the context of those sceptical of outsiders (Woolford et al., 2019). This meant that in the case of accessing Scotland's buyout communities, it was imperative that the data collection considered appropriate community entry and meaningful engagement with individuals from the initial stages of research design (Bain et al., 2022). Therefore, the researcher's services and time to volunteer for the community were offered at the opening consultation, with a clear statement that no research participation was expected in return (see Appendix IV). Short of spending significantly longer in place, this approach gave legitimacy to move in the community's space. While this method may appear less rigorous to begin with in terms of time, it is purposefully engineered in such a way to reach people and locations that traditional research methods would not have allowed. Influenced by ethnographic techniques

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), this research employed not only participation and observation methods but also an opportunity to formalise these conversations through interviews, subject to the participant’s willingness. Consequently, when referring to the innermost layer of the research onion framework, the data collection approach remained flexible, improving access to participants, recruitment, and response rate (Heath et al., 2018).

Given the constraints of time and resources, a cross-sectional study was deemed most appropriate. This allowed for an empirical contribution to community buyout research, while also serving to establish preliminary evidence that could inform the planning of a more advanced, future study (Wang and Cheng, 2020). Due to this consideration, it was pertinent to choose case studies that each presented a different context (Levy, 2008). Three locations were selected to encompass varying sizes, communities, goals, and times of purchase. The decision to select multiple case studies also reflected the limited availability of each community to engage with volunteers; to avoid overburdening any single group, time spent in each location varied accordingly (Table 2).

Location	Dates Spent on Site
Isle of Eigg	02/06/2025 – 07/06/2025
Evanton Community Wood	09/06/2025 – 10/06/2025
Langholm Initiative	11/06/2025 – 14/06/2025

Table 2: Case study locations with the dates and duration of fieldwork conducted at each site (own creation)

Identification of and initial contact with buyouts was orchestrated through Community Land Scotland, a pre-existing membership organisation for community landowners. A list of suitable locations was compiled from this (Table 3) and an approach to visit the site was made via their public point of contact. Utilising a snowball approach from here, as illustrated by Parker et al. (2019), was crucial for buyout communities, who required a degree of trust before participation. This was strengthened through the volunteering *in situ*, which helped the researcher integrate and approach other community members, leaders, and volunteers.

Location	Notes:
Carsphairn Community Woodland	<i>Around 49 hectares of woodland forest which is being regenerated for communities benefit</i>
Friends of Glenan Wood	<i>146 hectares, essentially wild but do wonder what I would gain from the 'community' there</i>
Isle of Eigg	<i>Have a deep understand of the island and its history due to prior reading, however is a popular location</i>
Findhorn Village Company	<i>Is a more urban community ownership model, but might provide some variation</i>
Evanton Wood	<i>160 acres which looks like a good and welcoming place to go</i>
Langholm Initiative	<i>One of the largest at 10,500 acres, so is heavily focussed on conservation and natural regeneration on a large scale</i>

Table 3: Own creation based on notes taken throughout the research period. Namely six of the top choices out of a short list of ten potential sites.

III.2.1 Participation/Observation

As the data collection period was limited to 13 days, most volunteering and scheduling was co-created between the researcher and local point of contact, involving a range of tasks and engagements (see Appendix II).

In alignment with Kramer and Adams (2017), ethnographic field notes were produced alongside these involvements (see Appendix III). The notes ranged from narrative descriptions of the events that occurred, as well as personal experiences *with* and evaluation *of* interactions with buyout communities. Head notes, referring simply to mental records, were the preferred method of collection, limiting the disruption note-taking may have had on the natural happenings of the setting (Kramer and Adams, 2017). The jotting down of words, phrases and brief observations was deemed appropriate however, in some circumstances, particularly when having informal conversations with community members. All notes were reflected on, developed, and rewritten at the end of the day, particularly in reference to the core themes outlined in the literature review.

II.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

Because interviews initially functioned as a *potential* additional method alongside observation and participation, flexibility was prioritised. This adaptability was especially valuable in the context of Scottish buy-outs, as it allowed the methodology to evolve in response to emerging trust-building needs and to support ongoing reflexivity in light of historical power dynamics between researchers and local communities. As such, formalised semi-structured interviews were carried out with willing participants, which concluded with *seven* interviews being conducted in total; participants were either members of the community or had some involvement with the community-owned land.

It is important to note that all *in situ* interviews varied in length and location (Table 4). Furthermore, while the initial interview questions were developed from the three key themes, the process was iterative; questions were adapted over time as greater familiarity with interviewing was gained and a clearer sense of the most relevant data emerged (See Appendix VII).

Participant	Location	Duration	Date
A	Isle of Eigg	59 minutes	05/06/2025
B _a and B _b	Isle of Eigg	1 hour 40 minutes	06/06/2025
C _a and C _b	Isle of Eigg	49 minutes	06/06/2025
D	Evanton Wood	1 hour 41 minutes	09/06/2025
E	Langholm Initiative	1 hour 47 minutes	11/06/2025
F	Langholm Initiative	36 minutes	12/06/2025
G	Langholm Initiative	22 minutes	13/06/2025

Table 4: Own creation based on the ‘formal’ interviews collected *in situ*. X_a and X_b refer to two different participants, interviewed at the same time.

II.3. Data analysis

All formal interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In contrast, informal conversations conducted *in situ* were documented as detailed notes within the research diary. The analysis began with the transcribed data, using NVivo software for the initial coding phase. Adopting a deductive ‘lumping’ approach (Saldaña, 2015, p.19), the data was first categorised according to the

three key themes identified in the literature review; however, this process revealed the need for a fourth category to address the specific dynamics of the Scottish buyout process. Following this, a second, more inductive iteration was conducted. This involved developing deeper, more specific codes that emerged directly from the data within each broad theme to produce the final categories for analysis (see Figure 6). Once the coding was complete, the analysis took a cross-case characteristic to compare how these themes were experienced across sites, identifying both shared patterns and context-specific variations (Ayres et al., 2003).

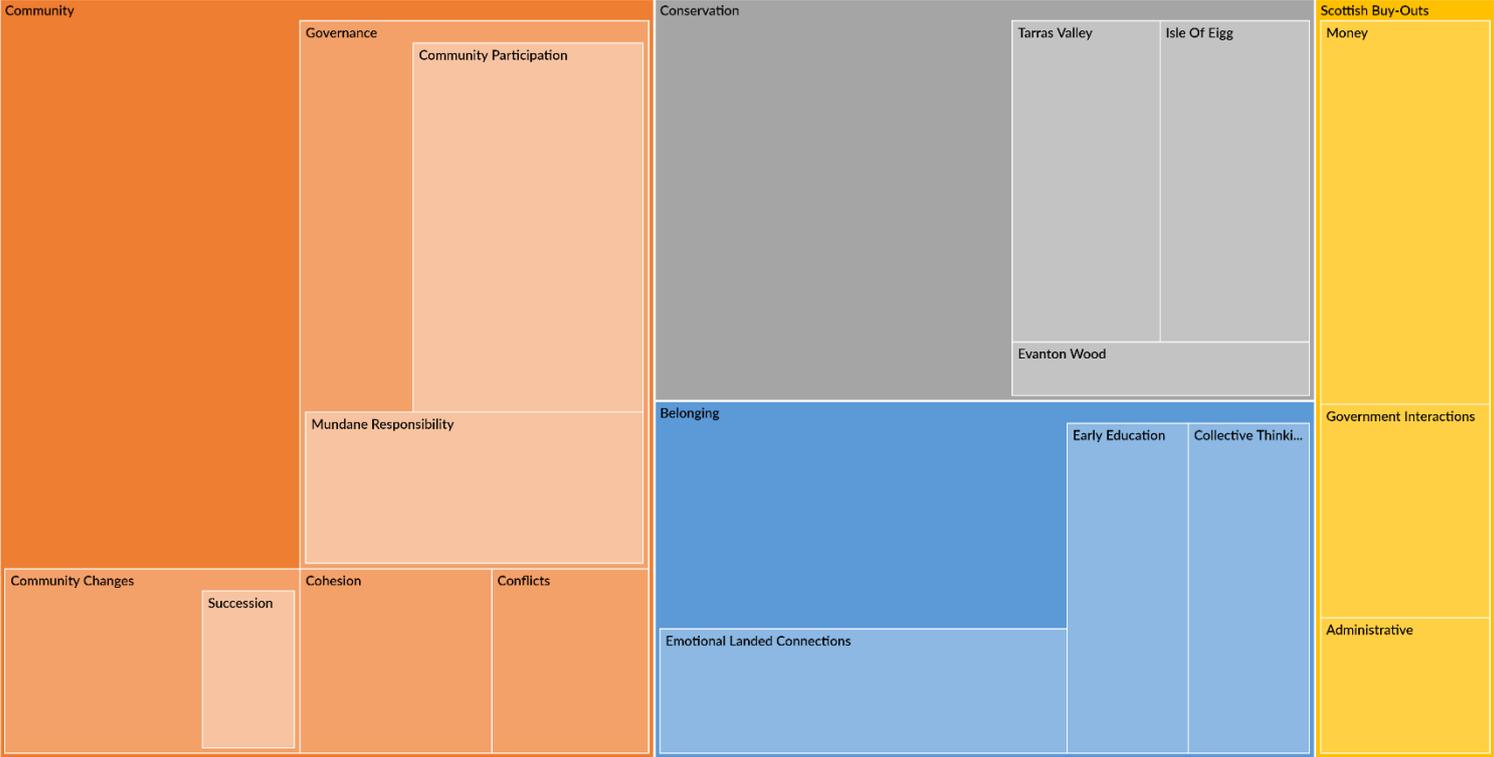


Figure 6: A coding tree created with ‘Hierachy’ function in NVivo. Illustrates the main key three themes and the iterative codes that arose from their exploration. In addition, there is an additional theme in the form of ‘Scottish Buy-Outs’ which emerged from the data analysis. Note the ‘conservation’ theme produced no iterative codes, as it was concluded to be best examined directly across sites (own creation).

Field notes were also used in conjunction with coded interview themes, not merely as supplementary material, but as a critical tool for triangulation. This approach allowed observational data to deepen the analysis by providing corroborating, challenging, or contextual insights into the final conclusions (Phillippi and Lauderdale, 2018). The process also highlighted the iterative nature of the data collection itself and the researcher's own contextual experience, which warranted investigation in its own right. Consequently, a distinct analytical section was developed to review the research experience itself, as a traditional comparative interview analysis was deemed solely insufficient for this research.

II.4. Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The main limitation lay in accessing the community buyouts, a challenge compounded by the lack of time attributed to the data collection period. The short duration meant each location received neither sufficient nor equal research attention; more time was spent with communities and participants who were more available, which may have skewed the research toward buyouts perceived as 'more successful'. Consequently, more time in each community would have enabled the researcher to build greater trust, develop a more balanced understanding of behaviours and sentiments, and gain the contextual background necessary for a deeper interpretation of community ownership in each case.

Although the research did not involve particularly sensitive populations, the exploratory nature of the topic involved discussions of personal experiences and community relations. Ethical considerations and confidentiality were therefore prioritised, ensuring the specific identities of participants were kept anonymous to limit any potential impact on community relationships. Furthermore, all participants were fully informed of the research aims and intentions at all times, with consent obtained before note-taking or interviews. Individuals were also given the option to take breaks, skip questions, or withdraw from participation at any time.

CHAPTER IV: Case Studies

IV.1. Isle of Eigg



Photo set 1: Images taken by the researcher on the Isle of Eigg. Top left: Taken outside the Bothy on residents' crofting land. Top right: *An Sgùrr*, the Isle of Eigg's highest point. Bottom: 'Singing Sands' beach on the west side of the island.

One of the Small Isles in the Scottish Inner Hebrides, the Isle of Eigg is five miles long from north to south and three miles east to west. While a small island, its geography remains imposing and varied. Eigg's highest hill *An Sgurr*, reaches almost 400m above sea level, while at the lower lying points it boasts numerous beaches and a 'Caledonian Rainforest'.

Recognised as one of the cornerstone buyouts, the community gained ownership on the 15th of July 1997 (McIntosh 2004). Prior to any land reform legislation, the residents of Eigg had struggled under centuries of the landlord system, culminating in the last 20 years under British businessman and Olympian, Keith Schellenberg (McIntosh, 2004). Although a rocky and uncertain buyout period ensued, the entire purchase price of £1.5 million was raised by the public, and Eigg was eventually transferred into community ownership. Since then, the population has almost doubled from 60 to

~115 permanent residents (BBC Travel, 2023). With ferry links, subject to weather, to the mainland only six times a week, Eigg is characterised by a tight-knit island community with a self-sufficient mindset (Danson and Burnett, 2021). As of 2008, their three-pronged approach to renewable energy (wind, solar, and hydro) provides a completely autonomous all-year-round electricity supply (BBC Travel, 2023), supporting a rise in tourist business – most notably Airbnb’s, a community tearoom, and a local shop (Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, 2024).

IV.2. Evanton Community Woodland



Photo set 2: Images taken by the researcher at Evanton Wood. Top left: A cabin that was built after community ownership. Has an all-purpose use from storage to hosting educational and social gatherings. Top right: An example of Sitka Spruce growing, one of the invasive species being cut back as part of the management plan. Bottom: Newly built pond to support a new habitat

Bought through emancipation money by the Novar estate (c. 1800s), this 160-acre landscape is a coniferous woodland (Evanton Wood Community Company, 2024a). With species classification dating back to the 1790s, its present structure is mostly a direct result of a written forestry plan

implemented by Sir William Schlich for Viscount Novar in 1899 after storms of 1893-94 overthrew no less than 55,000 trees (Evanton Wood Community Company, 2024a). In some ways, it embodies the type of woodland that the Scottish Forestry Strategy aspires to create (Scottish Executive, 2006) and when the land was put up for sale by the Novar estate, it already contained a higher biodiversity value than a conventional coniferous plantation (Evanton Wood Community Company, 2024a).

In September 2012, its second governmental buyout submission was successful, and the land was purchased for £300,000. Raised by a combination of donors (Evanton Wood Community Company, 2024b), this woodland is now run and managed by a community board and a range of volunteers. Set against the backdrop of the village of Evanton, with a population of around 1,200, this woodland sits in a recreational and educational setting for the benefit of the surrounding community.

IV.3. The Langholm Initiative (Tarras Valley)



Photo set 3: Images taken by the researcher at The Langholm Initiative. Top left: Taken on a local outdoor school day, as students used their environment to build obstacle courses. Top right: A view of the north half of the site. Bottom: View of Tarras Valley, shot from the ‘bird watching box’

Formed in 1994, the Langholm Initiative is one of south Scotland's earliest development trusts. Created as a partnership between public and private sectors, it was a response to a steady decline of traditional industrial industries that damaged the local populations and economy (The Langholm Initiative, 2024). Langholm is a town of just over 2,000, and the moorland is steeped in tradition and historic memory – playing the battleground for the yearly 'Common Riding' tradition which marks the boundaries of the common land given to the townsfolk over 260 years ago (Bogle, 1997). However, it wasn't until May 2019 that 10,500 acres of moorland were put up for community sale by the Buccleuch Estates (BBC News, 2019b). Although originally part of a larger 25,000-acre sale, half of this crossed over county lines into Scottish Borders, whose sale went to a private carbon capture organisation, Oxygen Conservation.

Tarras Valley refers to the geographical area, which has historically been used as a grouse moor and includes upland moorland, ancient woodlands, river meadows, peatlands, and 8 properties, including an upland hefted sheep farm (Tarras Valley Nature Reserve, 2023). Now the largest buyout in the south of Scotland, its fundraising campaign accrued £3.8 million in the first 6 months (Tarras Valley Nature Reserve, 2023). This enabled the initial purchase of 5,200 acres in March 2021, while the final 5,300 acres was held off the open market by Buccleuch until an additional £2.2 million was raised, finalising the second deal in November 2022 (Bunting, 2022). Run by a team of seven, the Langholm Initiative aims to use natural regeneration techniques to transform the moorland into the *Tarras Valley Nature Reserve*.

CHAPTER V: Analysis and Discussion

The process of analysing and discussing this research's results was in itself crucial to crafting the research questions and guiding their focus. The result, therefore, is an analytical chapter that centres the lived experiences of Scottish buy-out communities and critically engages with the iterative process of the research itself. By drawing from Holstein and Gubruim's active interview (1995), this chapter not only empirically maps the enactment of community ownership across the landscape, but on a deeper level, interrogates the underlying rationales of participants' narratives to illuminate the nature of their emotional connections to land.

The first section therefore positions the participants as active subjects, taking into consideration the emergent interview themes, the people involved in the research process and the context from which they engaged. The second section analyses the buyout itself as a formative experience shaping a community's structure, purpose, and day-to-day realities. The third section applies the three key areas from the literature review to the Scottish context, using them as points of departure to examine how each manifests across the sites.

V.1. A Critical Reflection

'A place is only a good as its people'

Overheard in the Tea Room on the Isle of Eigg

While each case study touched upon a wide array of topics, the primary focus of community ownership was unique to each context, and in some cases, continued right down to the individual level. In the case of the Langholm Initiative, community ownership was continuously framed in relation to its conservation potential. Its heavy focus on the 'natural regeneration' of the land intertwined community ownership as a means to this end. This was particularly pertinent when in conversation with participant E, who expertly outlined the material happenings of ownership in this relation (Sitka spruce removal, peatland restoration, native woodland replanting, bracken bashing, and sustainable livestock grazing). Much of the pre-existing conservation literature champions the community approach, so a tendency to gravitate towards this was no surprise (Berkes et al., 2000; Brondízio et al., 2021; Sele and Mukundi, 2024). Yet while discussion within Evanton Wood also

touched on the woodland management of the community-owned land, participant D seemed to be most focused on how community ownership had unlocked increased community engagement:

'They had been involved as individual users...but it wasn't used in an active way by the community.'

Participant D – Evanton Wood

Conversations leaned towards school outreach programmes, dementia support groups, community concerts and forestry training. As community capacity literature highlights, it takes time to build engagement (Vidal, 2017), suggesting that temporality needs to be considered when discussing the material socio-ecological expression of community ownership. Predictably then, having eight years under ownership, compared to the Langholm Initiatives' three, gives Evanton Wood a higher likelihood of both discussing and enacting more complex community engagements. This consideration helped contextualise the interviews of all Eigg participants, whose backgrounds included over 20 years of lived connection to the land. This sustained engagement, whether through direct crofting work or extensive community contribution, appeared to have cultivated a relationship with the landscape that transcended a purely utilitarian one, seen in the personal, emotive nature of their responses (Figure 7)

'It's in moments like this, when we've celebrated an anniversary, you sit there and realise just exactly what you've built. It's amazing'

Participant A – Isle of Eigg

'I feel completely at home here. I can do what I wanna do and I can be who I wanna be'

Participant C_b – Isle of Eigg

'And I'm ready, if I have to die tomorrow. Because I've experienced the joy of nature and living on Eigg. In Utopia. So, yeah, it wouldn't matter to me'

Participant B_a – Isle of Eigg

Figure 7: Quotes from the Isle of Eigg that illustrate the emotive way participants spoke about the island (own creation)

The pattern in this interview data suggests that the depth of emotive expression is less a function of community ownership in itself, and more a reflection of the individual participant's unique history of engagement with the land - a finding that aligns with Bennet's (2012) work on place attachment. The Langholm case study illustrates this distinction perfectly. Participant E, whose relationship with the

land was primarily occupational, discussed ownership through a technical lens, drawing on extensive biological knowledge in scientifically detailed responses. In stark contrast, Participant F, who had grown up on the land and served on the community council, spoke in terms of kinship and stewardship. Their descriptions moved beyond the material, framing the land as a 'homeland' and their role as that of its 'custodians'. This reveals that the material nature of a community's socio-ecological relationship - and how it was articulated - was profoundly shaped by individual history and engagement, ultimately supporting the idea that a single label of 'community ownership' encompasses vastly different lived realities (Godden and Tehan, 2010).

It is crucial to note that this emotive connection was not contingent on ancestry; participants were often not of Scottish heritage, let alone of direct landed descent, which challenged any notion that belonging is exclusively inherited (Geschiere, 2009). However, this emotive perspective, whether inherited or built, **always** emerged from participants with a direct stake in community ownership. Fieldwork at *Seeds of Scotland* gave a perspective from a farmland with a landlord contract. For these individuals, the socio-ecological romance of ownership was secondary to the practical need for security of tenure. One person noted that their current landlord had been incredibly helpful, providing essential infrastructure that was vital to their business.

'...had put in infrastructure that without, we wouldn't have been able to get the business off the ground.'

This highlights that relationships with the land exist on something akin to a spectrum, fundamentally influenced by material security (Sauer, 2012; Bender, 2024). Where those at one end of the spectrum are focused on the immediate practicalities of tenure, those with established community ownership can cultivate a more multifaceted connection, speaking in terms of conservation, community, and identity.

This is not to say community-owned landscapes are immune from the material realities of the modern world. Indeed a key 'material reality' was their status as objects of intense public and academic scrutiny. Consequently, the acts of active participation - whether clearing invasive species in Evanton, supporting youth activities in Langholm, or joining the local choir on Eigg - were more than just methodological preliminaries. They were fundamental to the research process, confirming that participant receptivity and the authenticity of the data are directly proportional to the researcher's demonstrated commitment and immersion in the community (Christopher et al., 2008). This intense focus, however, had led to a palpable sense of 'research fatigue', particularly among Eigg residents, who expressed a wariness born from years of intense academic scrutiny.

And I'm not frightened to tell you this. I wouldn't tell anybody it, but I think you understand

Participant B_a

Careful what you say now (Directed toward participant C_b)

Participant C_a

This finding raises critical questions about a particular vulnerability of such community bodies under ownership. Unlike established local councils, which are more insulated, these easily exploitable and often-studied communities are susceptible to extractive research practices, forcing them to adopt a more guarded public posture, shaping the contours of the narratives they are willing to share. Therefore, the understanding of community ownership captured in these pages is necessarily partial. It reflects a reality that is both generously shared through earned trust and cautiously guarded due to a history of over-exposure. Therefore, to analyse these communities' socio-ecological relationships is to appreciate the complex reasons behind what is revealed and, just as importantly, what remains concealed.

V.2. The Buyout

I used to make things, and then after the buyout, I spent my whole time in front of a computer.

Participant A

V.2.1. Money

A defining financial hurdle for any community buyout sits in the escalating price of land in Scotland, driven by a recent boom in 'green investment' and natural capital (Hollingdale, 2022) (Table 5).

Location	Size in acres	Year of Purchase	Overall Purchase Price	Cost per acre
Isle of Eigg	7,534	1997	£1.5 million	£199
Evanton Wood	160	2012	£300,000	£1,875
Langholm Initiative	10,500	2022	£6 million	£571

Table 5: Financial data for each community buyout, showing the total purchase price, land size, and calculated cost per acre. The cost per acre is a simple calculation (price divided by size) and does not account for the value of existing assets such as housing, infrastructure, or woodland (own creation)

This immense cost forced communities into a heavy reliance on a few key funders, most notably the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Discussions revealed that this dependence makes the buyout process incredibly precarious; Eigg's bid was initially rejected as being too 'political,' while Evanton Wood was initially denied because their governance plan did not meet the funder's criteria. This 'tick-box exercise', as one participant termed it, extends deep into the realities of land governance itself.

And there's a whole tick box exercise to fit the criteria for the various funding.

Participant C_a

By lacking independent monetary capabilities, all three case studies relied on a complex web of external funding from sources like the Empty Homes Initiative, NatureScot, and various woodland trusts. While this reliance on funding is not inherently negative - indeed, Eigg's pioneering renewable energy grid was only possible through a 'Big Green Challenge' grant – it means community on-the-ground priorities and relationships were perpetually shaped by the need to either adhere to external criteria or generate their own income to avoid collapse (BBC News, 2024). On Eigg, the island's very success had created a dependence on tourism for income, leading to what one described as being a 'victim of its own success'. In Langholm, the need to secure staff funding directly influenced their strategic focus.

We're incorporating more corporate volunteering and paid visits into my role because...in order to keep my job, I need to generate income

Participant E

This reality raises critical questions about the autonomous capacity of community ownership to build authentic socio-ecological relationships, especially when contrasted with private 'green' investors, such as Oxygen Conservation, who faced far less scrutiny for their £14 million purchase (Hollingdale, 2022).

V.2.2. Administration

Beyond the monetary hurdles, the Scottish buyout process devolves a significant administrative responsibility onto the community, epitomised by the increasing demand of the formal management plan required for purchase. The extensive, detailed document required for the Langholm buyout stands in stark contrast to the Isle of Eigg's pre-legislation purchase, which needed no such plan (Figure 8).

3a: Deliver carbon capture by restoring nature					
Action Ref.	What are we going to do?	Timescale	Who's leading?	Who's supporting?	Additional Info
3ai	Whole system restoration of the land to support nature-based carbon capture e.g. woodlands and peatlands.	Ongoing	Reserve Manager	Development Manager	Subject to ongoing funding to deliver restoration works.

3b: Build Climate Resilience					
Action Ref.	What are we going to do?	Timescale	Who's leading?	Who's supporting?	Additional Info
3bi	Create a community asset register to support our wildfire incident response plan.	2025	Reserve Manager	Development Manager, Scottish Fire and Rescue	Incident response plan developed with Scottish Fire and Rescue.
3bii	Restore natural hydrology, rewetting the land to help increase natural resilience to more extreme weather drought and flood.	Ongoing	Reserve Manager		*Ref section 2 Nature, actions 2c and 2e.

1a: Ensure Langholm feels the economic benefits					
Action Ref.	What are we going to do?	Timescale	Who's leading?	Who's supporting?	Additional Info
1ai	Develop work opportunities for young people focussing on ages 16-30. E.g. Placements, apprenticeships and work experience.	Ongoing	Engagement Officer	Reserve Manager	Hosted 2 summer work placements for local young people. Looking to expand. Working with Langholm Academy, and other D&G young people's organisations.
1aii	Maintain and expand existing activity through Tarras Valley to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use and support local businesses Generate more visits and encourage visitor spend in the local area 	Ongoing	Development Manager	LI Team/ LI Board	Approx. £160k into local economy through TVNR in 2023-2024. Work to grow this in future years.
1aiii	Continue to grow a small but secure base of local employment on the reserve (includes Langholm Initiative staff, use of contractors and wider enterprise opportunities)	Ongoing	Langholm Initiative		6 full time and 1 part time jobs created so far directly through LI. Currently use of approx. 54 local contractors and businesses.

Figure 8: Extracts from The Langholm Initiative’s five year management plan. The plan is split into four key objectives: People, Nature, Climate, and Sustainability. Top table: Details a selection of the *climate* targets. Bottom: Details a selection of the *people* targets. A full description of the plan can be found on their website - <https://www.tarrasvalleynaturereserve.org/our-5-year-plan/>

Supported by Dinnie and Holstead (2018), it became evident that this administrative compliance was materially shaping communities’ practices. For Eigg, housing development was contingent on renewable energy compliance and beach clean-ups were hampered by a lack of formal government litter recognition. Similarly, Evanton faced ongoing struggles with planning permissions, while Langholm's rewilding efforts were restricted by NatureScot's stringent Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) regulations. These constraints did not appear to stem from malicious intent, but from a state bureaucracy ill-equipped to engage with these novel, semi-autonomous bodies. Consequently, navigating this bureaucratic complexity required more than just local passion; it demanded a specific set of professional capabilities, particularly business and administrative acumen (Shaw, 2017). As Participant F made clear, enthusiasm must be guided by experience.

He had great business experience, so I was guided. I was the enthusiast, but they were the business head.

Participant F

This necessity for professional expertise acts as a de facto filter, determining which communities can successfully advance (Mulholland et al., 2015). Information disclosed regarding the nearby Milton Community Trust, an initiative in a more deprived area which almost faced collapse after failing to meet administrative due diligence, underscores this point. So a policy originally designed for universal socio-ecological empowerment may, in practice, foster this 'institutional Darwinism' (Creamer, 2015), being most accessible to communities already rich in social capital - in the form of residents with business, legal, or administrative expertise - thereby gatekeeping the benefits of ownership from more marginalised groups.

V.2.3. Government Linkages

Autonomy. This ideal was deeply held across all case studies; as one participant on an Eigg wildlife walk noted, even if community ownership has its 'thorns', at least 'we get to make their own decisions'. Echoed by Participant D...

It needs somebody to take the initiative, and you're more likely to take the initiative if you...don't need to go cap in hand to anybody else.

...this self-determination was key to local collective action (Ostrom, 2000). Yet what socio-ecological potential it may have had as a grassroots movement has been firmly drawn into the field of Scottish party politics. Buyouts' strong association with the SNP and the Scottish Green Party, in particular, has lent the movement a distinct political alignment. As Participant G revealed when discussing the proposed Galloway Biosphere National Park, the 'general realpolitik' of a region heavily impacts the viability of any change in land use:

That comes from your political background...part of the commitment in the manifesto was to create another national park. So it was forced to find one...there are far more Landowners in conservative councils, and they very much opposed it. The Eastern Region here...is more Labour and SNP. Whereas the Western Region is more conservative. So they like private land owning...

Participant G

This politicisation means that while state support and favourable legislation are crucial for buyouts to succeed, this very support risks co-opting the movement's grassroots identity, aligning its goals with

party manifestos rather than the locals' socio-ecological needs. This tension is apparent across the entire spectrum of land reform (Sumner and Hughes, 2024). On one end sits new government legislation proposing powers to forcibly break up large estates - a move derided by some as 'ideologically driven' yet dismissed by Participant D as merely a 'drop in the ocean' (Ross, 2025). At the other end are activist groups like Land Moot, whose members engage in direct action by occupying lairds' second homes to demand more systemic change (Figure 9).

A LAND MOOT

Friday 29 November - Sunday 2 December 2024
Galgael & Clyde Community Hall



Friday

An evening of stories & songs of land resistance
Hosted by Anna O'Neill & Ewen MacIntyre | MAIN SPACE & GARDEN

5pm onwards Arrivals
6-7pm Dinner
7-8pm Moot Hill Ceremony
8-11pm Singing

Saturday morning

9.30am-1pm Histories of land resistance in Scotland
Hosted by Em Elliot Walker & David Lees | MAIN SPACE

John Holiday on Tiree Land Raids/ Crofting
Iain Craig & Flora Brown on history of Community Land Ownership
Joey Simons on Glasgow Housing Struggle Archive
John Cooper on Direct Action on housing in Castlemilk
Andrew MacKillop on Highland resistance to landlordism
Grace Wright on Women in the Crofters War on Eilean Sgitheanach (Skye)

Saturday afternoon

1-2.30pm Lunch by KIN Kitchen

2.30-4pm Part 1: Tactics for how we get there
~ parallel workshop sessions - put your name down for one session ~

Ecology of struggle

MAIN SPACE

How do we connect struggles, between rural & urban, land & housing? Explore a diversity of tactics and strategies with Eva Schoenfeld & Justin Kenrick from Grassroots to Global, while mapping the existing Scottish Land/Housing resistance, how to get involved, & what is missing!

The common good

THE OFFICE

What are the alternatives to the non-profit industrial complex? Folk from Hawick Common Good Fund, Worker Co-ops Federation, Common Treasury & Radical Routes propose and discuss alternative methods of financing our work.

Reclaiming the narratives

FRONT ROOM

What's the role of culture & storytelling in land struggle? Barbara Wanderley shares the work of indigenous communities in the Amazon, Paula Larkin speaks about 'Occupy, Occupy, Occupy' archiving project, & Daniel Cullen shares theatre-making about the struggles of contemporary Skye.

The laws of the land

THE SNUG

SCALP present a legal briefing on squatting and occupation in Scotland, while Community Land Scotland & Malcolm Colme report on legal mechanisms which offer potential for reclaiming land & resources within Scotland.

4pm 15 min break

4.15-5.45pm Part 2: The culture we build along the way
~ parallel workshop sessions - put your name down for one session ~

Figure 9: Materials from a 'Land Moot' gathering given to the researcher during fieldwork. It illustrates this 'grassroots', direct-action end of the land reform spectrum. The event itinerary and discussion topics highlight a focus on land and government mobilisation which contrasts with opposing groups who claim state-led legislative approaches are already too interventionist (Land Moot promotional materials 2024)

The consequence of this politicisation is that a community's personal and emotive connection to place is inevitably reframed. It is no longer just a local sentiment; it becomes a public position that must be articulated and defended not just against a former landowner, but within the contested arena of national ideology and political strategy.

V.3. Interrogating community

We don't all love each other. We're human beings. But we need each other

Participant C_a

A key finding is that community ownership provided residents with greater governance over their land, directly leading to a significant increase in opportunities for the community (Callaghan et al., 2011; Haugh, 2022; Bosworth et al., 2025). Langholm was a perfect example. Their plans to hire and train local contractors, employ full-time rangers, build glamping sites, and host events were all designed to funnel resources back into the community. Deploying these projects however, required cohesive governance structures (Lin, 2001), which did vary across cases as needs and responsibilities changed. Evanton Wood was run by a small volunteer board, compared to Eigg's intricate web of trusts and subsidiaries, whose responsibility was, at base level, the survival of their island community. Consequently, community governance shouldn't be romanticised; on Eigg, for instance, early efforts were deemed successful largely because the initial conditions had been so poor.

In the beginning, it was really easy. I mean, it sounds funny but because everything was so crap, anything you did was an improvement. Now it's much harder.

Participant C_b

So while holding the promise of a more equitable livelihood, community governance's day-to-day reality placed strain on the population (Danson and Burnett, 2021). This human cost was a constant theme, with interviewees repeatedly citing being at 'max stretch' and the critical need for 'more staff' or volunteers, admitting that 'without that input it wouldn't work'. But while the strain on community governance is a profound vulnerability, interviews seemed to support the notion that this forced interdependence - hammered out in the difficult, day-to-day work of shared responsibility - is precisely what forges such a strong sense of collective identity (Coser, 1956; Bryden and Geisler, 2007; Rennie and Billing, 2015).

Much of the strain detailed by participants stemmed not from grand projects, but from the relentless weight of what La Grouw et al. (2024) term 'mundane responsibility'. This dissertation uses the concept to refer to the myriad of 'small', essential tasks – perhaps traditionally the purview of local councils - that are devolved to the community through ownership. Each location spoke of the continuous management of signs, maps, seating, path clearing, health and safety protocols, and fence repairs. This burden was amplified on the Isle of Eigg, the only residential site in this study. There, the community was responsible not just for public amenities but for maintaining core

infrastructure, including electricity cables, freshwater supplies, broadband access, and housing safety. Drawing on Scott (1985) then, it begs the question, does mundane responsibility neutralise mundane resistance? By adopting the mundane responsibilities of a council, communities risk being drawn into conventional modes of management, a process that could stifle the potential to forge new, more organic socio-ecological relationships. However, this research argues a more complex reality, with that same responsibility also working at a deeper, personal level (Scannell and Gifford, 2010).

What brings awareness...is having to having to take responsibility for your own life and for the environment around you. That awareness is empowering because...you're then learning the joy that nature can give you

Participant B_a

Linked with Agrawal's 'enviornmentality', the lived experience with the land through practical, hands-on stewardship may be assisting the creation of 'environmental subjects' (Agrawal, 2005). On Eigg, wildlife WhatsApp groups democratised the collection of ecological data, making knowledge of the island's biodiversity an inclusive, collective venture. In Evanton Wood, volunteers had to acquire specialised knowledge of tree identification and cropping techniques to appropriately manage the woodland. Perhaps most powerfully, on Langholm's vast 10,500-acre 'blank page,' their very act of surveying and classifying the landscape could be forging a new, intimate relationship with the land, rooted in direct, empirical awareness. Ultimately, here, the mundane is made meaningful through these engagements and the abstract ideal of 'socio-ecological potential' becomes a participative ecological reality.

While communities engaged with the land in a variety of similar ways, through school groups, volunteer work, and recreation, a deeper interrogation reveals that the motivations underpinning this participation varied dramatically. On the Isle of Eigg, socio-ecological engagement was consistently framed as a matter of existential necessity (Figure 10). The island's geography and inherent vulnerability meant that active participation was a reciprocal obligation, essential for collective survival. This motivation contrasts sharply with the mainland sites. There, while reciprocity was also mentioned - individuals 'get something back from it' - participation remained a choice, driven by a desire for ecological or social benefits rather than a prerequisite for the community's basic functioning (Figure 10).

If Eigg is knackered it starts falling apart and then your life is gonna be a lot more difficult. So I think that's one of the things that pulls everybody together.

Participant C_b - **Isle of Eigg**

It appeals to some people and not to others...people often don't come to the wood even though we're right on the doorstep

Participant A - **Evanton Wood**

Most people sit somewhere in the middle, just indifferent about it (in reference to the community owned land).

Participant E - **Langholm Initiative**

Figure 10: A selection of quotes demonstrating the differing levels of community participation across the case study sites. The quotes contrast the view of participation as an 'existential necessity' on the Isle of Eigg with it being a matter of personal choice on the mainland sites

This does not devalue these choice-based motivations, but it continues to support the conclusion that the depth of socio-ecological action is ultimately forged *less by* the legal model of 'community ownership' itself, and *more by* the pre-existing material realities of a place and people – like the existential pressures of island life. Therefore, the primary role of community ownership may not be simply to provide access, but to actively cultivate this sense of shared fate between the people and their place.

V.4. To Belong or Not to Belong, That Is the Question

I said 'do you think you could produce something for us for the buyout handover?' Now we have our own piece of music.

Participant F

A sense of shared fate manifested through the preservation of 'the local'. Participants spoke of the buyout as a way to 'stave off the worst of what might befall the town' or as the 'one chance of keeping a community. This protective undertone is unsurprising, given Scotland's turbulent history of Clearances and the enduring need to protect local identity (McCrone, 1997). However, this research

found that this shared purpose did not necessarily translate into a new, radical collective identity (Geschiere, 2009). Participants largely saw themselves not as 'eco-warriors' or 'activists', but as 'ordinary folk', with little reflection on the grander political nature of their achievement. This meant that insider/outsider dynamics were not revolutionary, but instead mirrored those of any tight-knit rural community, based on a shared commitment to preserving 'the local'. Additionally, belonging was not automatically conferred by the buyout; rather, it was a status often earned by newcomers through a demonstrated commitment to the community's values and its preservation (Brown et al., 2012).

Everybody that comes to live here gets into Eigg, the lifestyle, and wants to keep it as beautiful as it is. That's what makes them work really hard

Participant A

However, this method of fostering belonging is not without its own tensions. A conversation with a tenanted farmer spoke of this complexity. For them, vesting the land in a single community entity 'shuts it down', preventing a diverse ecosystem of small enterprises from forming their own networks of knowledge and mutual support. They pointed to the Balcaskie Estate, a traditional estate rented to a mixture of tenant farms, as a model that has cultivated its own vibrant, multi-faceted community. This suggests that in replacing one large landowner with a single community entity, the buyout model risks replicating the same form of socio-ecological exclusivity that inadvertently limits the very potential for organic, diverse landed communities to emerge.

What was undisputed across all sites however, was the congruent and powerful emphasis placed on children and their education.

You've got to start with the kids at a very young age and get it into their head that this is their land. And it's their future, not ours. Our day is just about over.

Participant F

This commitment was enacted through bespoke educational programs uniquely enabled by the ownership model. On Eigg, Gaelic schooling was used to teach about specific island life, moving beyond generic 'Highland' education. In Evanton and Langholm, regular school and youth group sessions focused on practical woodland skills like shelter building, tree identification, and fire lighting. Informed by participation in these sessions, these activities taught more than just practical skills. The children were not just visitors in a public park or on a private estate; they were engaging with a space that was, in a very real sense, theirs.

The more they know and understand about the local area, the more likely they are to protect it.

Local Langholm Brownie leader

Education, therefore, was not simply about learning about the land, but about internalising a sense of belonging, responsibility, and legitimate stewardship (Lave and Wenger, 1991; McLeod et al., 2024). This focus on youth is supported by much of the pre-existing literature and represents one of the most tangible, forward-looking socio-ecological outcomes of the buyout model: a direct investment in cultivating the next generation of custodians (Wise et al., 2023). This does not devalue the emotional connections within the current generation, which were particularly potent on the Isle of Eigg.

It's all about being in touch with the weather and nature...It's an understanding that everything else is equal to us. And one really does. Just by doing it every day and being among it.

Participant C_b

As previously discussed, this powerful sense of belonging is likely a complex product of temporality (25 years of ownership) and spatiality (the island's existential reality). Consequently, this *mature*, land-based connection offers a sharp contrast to the contemporary views of the newly purchased Tarras Valley. There, participants voiced a primary attachment not to the land itself, but to its former owner, the Buccleuch Estate, as an institution.

They had given people livelihoods...they provided trade training for...hundreds of folk. They provided accommodation for people. So you cannot ignore that.

Participant F

The task for the Langholm Initiative, therefore, appeared to be the difficult one of forging a new sense of socio-ecological belonging (Fry, 2023), essentially transferring loyalty from the old laird to the community-owned landscape. However, a fieldwork gift of 'Scotland Small?', an old poem from the 1930s, celebrating a profound, centuries-old local connection to that very landscape, revealed a different truth (Figure 11).

SCOTLAND SMALL?

Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland *small*?
Only as a patch of hillside maybe a cliché corner.
To a fool who cries "Nothing but heather!" where in September another
Sitting there and resting and gazing around
Sees not only the heather but blaeberreries
With bright green leaves and leaves already turned scarlet,
Hiding ripe blueberries; and amongst the sage green leaves
Of the bog-myrtle the golden flowers of the tormentil shining;
And the small bare places, where the little Blackfaced sheep
Found grazing, milkworts blue as summer skies;
And down in neglected peat-hags, not worked
Within living memory, sphagnum moss in pastel shades
Of yellow, green and pink; sundew and butterwort
Waiting with wide-open sticky leaves for their tiny winged prey;
And nodding harebells vying in their colour
With the blue butterflies that poise themselves delicately upon them;
And stunted rowans with harsh dry leaves of glorious colour.
"Nothing but heather!" - How marvellously descriptive! AND INCOMPLETE!

Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve)

Figure 11: A scanned copy of the poem 'Scotland Small?' (c. 1930), received during fieldwork at Langholm. It was gifted with the sentiment that it still reflects how the community feels about the land today. Its central theme is the overlooked beauty of the moorland, suggesting that for those who truly understand it, the landscape holds a profound, hidden value.

Its emotive description of Langholm's physical moorland, suggests that a deep attachment to the land had not been absent, but perhaps overshadowed by the long presence of the estate. This suggests community ownerships socio-ecological potential is less a case of *creating* a new landed connection, and more a case of *enabling* a deep sense of landed belonging to be reclaimed, realised, and disentangled from its former owners.

V.5. Tackling 'Community Conservation'

For the actual land restoration we need to balance what people want and what the scientific evidence says.

Participant E

This research began with the assumption that community ownership would, in itself, be a direct catalyst for superior forms of ecological restoration (Ostrom, 1990). However, fieldwork quickly revealed that this should not be a core focus, as motivations for conservation were more pragmatic than ideological. For Eigg, environmental responsibility was a matter of maintaining a home (Jupiter et al., 2014); for Evanton Wood, it was about continuing an existing management plan; and for

Langholm, it was a direct requirement of their buyout funding to create a nature reserve. This revealed that the study's initial assumption was itself a reflection of the broader tendency in the Global North to romanticise community structures for their 'greening' potential, when the reality is often simply about survival and meeting obligations (Knutsson et al., 2024).

Fieldwork with the Langholm initiative initially offered little more than conventional conservation formulas; consult with locals and then deploy scientific tactics accordingly. Although this well-established method appears to offer nothing socio-ecologically new, such a conclusion would fail to consider that the model's true potential lies not in the immediate ecological tactics it deploys, but in the slow, transformative socio-ecological process it sets in motion. As the literature and this chapter have argued, it is the daily, lived responsibility of stewardship that forges a deep connection between people and place (Fry, 2023; Barragan-Jason et al., 2023). The ultimate ecological value of community ownership, therefore, may not be in the short-term achievement of 'bottom-up conservation', but in the decades-long project of creating its future custodians whose understanding of ecological responsibility is deep set into their understandings of the land.

CHAPTER VI: Conclusion

This research contributes to a critical gap in the literature by providing an empirical account of the lived experience of three Scottish community buyouts. The analysis concludes that the socio-ecological power of the Scottish community ownership model lies not in the simple transfer of legal title, but in the complex, lived process it initiates. Supported by existing literature (DTAS, 2012; Mulholland et al., 2015; Sharma, 2023), this complexity is extenuated by the institutional processes, financial realities, and administrative burdens of Scotland's buyout model. It suggests that state regulation, party politics, and external funders are not mere background noises; they are tangible forces that shape this lived experience. By bringing in the analytical lenses of community and belonging, this dissertation has centred how this process functions on the ground. It reveals that in the shared, day-to-day struggle of landed engagements and the 'mundane responsibility' that community ownership bestows, a renewed socio-ecological relationship is forged (Coser, 1956; Bryden and Geisler, 2007; Rennie and Billing, 2015). It suggests that this relationship is not static, and by drawing on the temporal aspect of lived experience, it illustrates how the focus of ownership and degree of landed belonging can change over time (Vidal, 2017). The interviews suggest that it is this continuous and emotive engagement with the land that is the very engine of place-making, a process through which a community's connection to its landscape can be both newly created and powerfully reclaimed (Davidson et al., 2012; Sultana, 2015; Fry, 2023). This provides the foundation for what appeared to be the model's ultimate promise: the long-term cultivation of future custodians - a generation whose relationship with the land is a matter of tangible responsibility, not abstract ideology.

However, this research also shows that community ownership is a nuanced and vulnerable endeavour, which pressurises the local community. Its socio-ecological possibilities are not guaranteed; they are contingent, profoundly shaped by the unique landed histories of a place, the specific capacities of its people, and the pressures of external forces (Si et al., 2022; Chiwaya and Mzuza, 2022; Phonchaluen et al., 2023). This model, therefore, possesses no innate capacity for 'sustainable' socio-ecological relations; as this research has shown, environmental protection depends less on the *form* of ownership and more on the *material realities* that communities must navigate.

Because this research offers a snapshot in time, the goal is not to provide definitive conclusions about community ownership's transformative potential but to illuminate a specific moment in its ongoing evolution. The socio-ecological relationships at the heart of this dissertation are likewise

fluid. Therefore, future research is not just recommended, it is essential. As the world changes, continued engagement is the only way to understand how these vital relationships adapt, making the act of research itself a crucial form of knowledge creation. This ongoing engagement is critical because community buyouts do not exist in a vacuum; their change in legal title does not lessen their exposure to the climate crisis and community ownership's very uniqueness has made them potent symbols in a world searching for ecological meaning. On Eigg, a doubling population has brought Amazon parcels and cruise ships. At Langholm, the initiative has a head office and a company car. As these projects are inevitably drawn further into the global mainstream, how long can they sustain the unique catalytic socio-ecological potential that makes them so compelling in the first place?

Ultimately then, community ownership is no panacea for our socio-ecological relationship. Its true significance is that it forces a fundamental shift in perspective. In an era of waning trust in centralised institutions, it relocates both agency and responsibility, bringing the abstract scale of our global challenges down to the tangible scale of the local community and the soil underfoot. It does not provide easy answers, but it powerfully poses the most essential question of our time: once given the autonomy to act, what responsibility will we take for the places we call home?

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APPENDICES

Appendix I. Initial Dissertation Proposal

MSC HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

DISSERTATION PLANS 2024-5

Please complete this document and submit it via the GEOG0103 Moodle page. This document is not assessed for a mark. It provides information for the convenor to allocate supervisors. You will find space for the text of the 1000-word proposal at the end of the spotlight section.

<p>NAME OF STUDENT</p> <p>Alfie Highland</p>

<p>TITLE OF PROPOSAL</p> <p>To what extent can we see community models of land ownership/governance as potential catalysts for fostering resilient pro-environmental beliefs/ecological narratives and sustainable community orientated conservation: A case study into the Isle of Eigg</p> <p><i>Or maybe this</i></p> <p>How do community buy-outs contribute to the 'reconnecting with nature' movement and how does community land ownership and governance intersect with environmental narratives, behaviour, and belonging?</p>
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<p>SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL Please give a 100-word summary of the proposal.</p> <p>This dissertation investigates the role of community buy-outs in Scotland, with a case study on the Isle of Eigg, in fostering pro-environmental beliefs, behaviours, and sustainable governance models. It examines how community land ownership intersects with environmental narratives, resident behaviours, and notions of belonging, exploring how these spaces may serve as catalysts for effective localised conservation and sustainable ecological narratives. By framing community buy-outs, in relation to land connection and belonging, and as part of a broader movement towards rethinking human-nature relationships, this research also aims to evaluate their role in bottom-up conservation and social-ecological transformation.</p>
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NAME OF PREFERRED SUPERVISOR

Eszter Kovacs

FULL PROPOSAL (Maximum 1000 words) to include brief context, research questions, and proposed methods.

Context

Our climate crisis is asking of us not just for a continuation of ‘business as normal’. The current economic, political, social, and even scientific method of protecting nature don’t seem to be propelling us in the right direction. As the world gets hotter, natural disasters increase, and people become discouraged by the politics of the day, humans are reevaluating the dominant/Western human-nature connection (Quinn, 1995)

As a result, calls for humanity to ‘reconnect with nature’ in order to regain ecological sustainability have burgeoned at both the scholarly and societal levels (Ives et al, 2018; Dean et al, 2021; Ojeda et al., 2022). While the physical manifestations of these actions and the circumstances in which they occur vary globally, the spaces in which this reactionary activism has emerged could be/should be viewed collectively through the lens of movement building.

Lots of the attention revolves around the idea of readdressing our ecological relationship, attempting to bring alternative meaning and values into various environmental knowledge and practices (Eisenstein, 2018; Boyce, Bhattacharyya, and Linklater, 2022; DePuy et al., 2022). Much of that learning has stemmed in recent years from an increasing focus on Indigenous and Traditional knowledge, bringing in ideas of reciprocity and kincentricity, to understand new connectivity’s and meanings (Watson et al., 2019; Kadykalo, Cooke, and Young, 2021; McAllister, Hikuroa, and Macinnis-Ng, 2023). This has begun to be used in praxis in Western conservation and environmental movements across the globe, with literature like *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *Sandtalk* bringing indigenous meaning into Western scientific conservation and perspectives.

Yet much of this literature links ideas of land, belonging, and ecological harmony to a collection of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and practices that have been passed down through generations, in a knowledge system distinct from our ‘own’ (Kimmerer, 2013; Yunkaporta, 2019; Arjaliès and Banerjee, 2024). This presents a challenge in truly valuing these lessons, believing them, maintaining them, and allowing them to inform our actions, behaviours, and beliefs, without genuine subjective engagement with these ways of knowing. As a result, we often struggle to fully grasp their depth and understand how to put these alternative knowledges into practice (Kadykalo, Cooke, and Young, 2021; McAllister, Hikuroa, and Macinnis-Ng, 2023), which raises the ongoing question of how we might reshape ecological narratives and behaviours within the context of our own knowledge system.

Bringing these ecological narratives into praxis is a complicated process at best. However, research suggests that they may be linked to notions of land and belonging, as many of these alternative

forms of knowledge production are place-based, helping bring meaning to their theories and ideas (Agrawal, A., 1995; Kimmerer, 2013; Yunkaporta, 2019). For many Indigenous languages, 'culture' loosely translates to 'being like our place,' with the belief that it is the interaction between people and place that enables environmental knowledge to accrue value and validity (Ereira, 1992). Consequently, this highlights land, ownership, and belonging as potential points of exploration in helping advance a lasting and sustainable ecological narrative within Western systems of power and knowledge.

Yet current forms of Western land governance and identity make it difficult to catalyse these alternative models of environmental thinking, particularly in the UK where much of the land is exclusionary and privately owned (Shrubsole, 2019). As a result, we need to look outside the normative ideas of land ownership to see what role these spaces may play in fostering alternative environmental thought, behaviour, and bottom-up conservation strategies.

For example, ideas of community-based land ownership both directly and indirectly challenges historical/colonial ideas of environmental knowledge production, land, and belonging (Hoffman, M., 2013; Thompson, 2015; Algoed and Torrales, 2024; Sumner and Hughes, 2024). In theory it purports to an autonomous and localised way of building alternative ecological narratives alongside a reclamation of land control (Veronesi, Algoed, and Hernández Torrales, 2022; Algoed, and Torrales, 2024). Whether this always holds true remains to be seen, but it underscores the importance of analysing these bottom-up, grassroots models of land ownership as essential spaces for exploration.

Land reform in Scotland in the 1990s, evoked the legal right of a local community to collectively purchase land, buildings, or other assets within their area (Danson, M. and Burnett, K.A., 2021; Doyle, C., 2023). Since 2000, community run land in Scotland has increased over 7 fold, populations have increased, alongside the ecological standings of many of the areas. A flagship location for this movement lies on the Scottish island of Eigg, community-owned since 1992. Since its acquisition, it has championed a fully renewable power grid, increased biodiversity, social justice, and food autonomy (Mc Morran, R., Scott, A.J. and Price, M.F., 2014). As a result, Eigg, along with numerous other community buy-out initiatives, provides a unique opportunity to examine how these spaces may be contributing to the 'reconnecting with nature' movement and explore how community land ownership and governance intersect with environmental narratives, behaviour, and belonging.

Research Objectives and Aims

I will explore the extent to which community buy-outs catalyse pro-environmental thought and practices, the role of land and belonging in this process, and the environmental relationships and behaviours that emerge within these spaces.

Draft Objectives:

1. What is the assemblage/composition of the island population and why/how people are here? Help think about the movement of ideas and backgrounds
2. To what extent has the biodiversity/ecology changed on community buy-out land? /What 'conservation' practices have taken place?
3. What kind of environmental thought/relationship/behaviour can be seen in these spaces? Does it challenge the hegemonic view of human-nature relationships?

4. How do community buy-outs affect ideas of citizenship/belonging? Does this have any effect on environmental narratives/behaviour

Proposed Methods

Due to time constraints, will only be visiting Eigg Island for 1-2 weeks in person. Not sure if I should be collecting primary data from other community-buy outs?

Interviews

Conduct 10-20 semi-structured interviews upon residents (potentially visitors) on Eigg Island. Use a coding tree to pull out major themes and beliefs (Objectives 3 and 4)

Would also like to interview key figures in the starting/conception of Eigg island, such as Alastair McIntosh (via Zoom) but still in process of getting in contact (Objectives 1 and potentially more)

Ethnographic Data

Will be recorded on Eigg Island, recording what I see, hear, feel (Objectives 1, 3, and 4)

Data Analysis

Very basic quantitative analysis, but all biodiversity and population data for Eigg is available via Scottish wildlife trust, so can use this to see how levels have changed under the community-buy imitative (Objective 1 and 2).

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Appendix II. Research Diary

Note – Example of physical field notes can be found in Appendix III

Date of Entry	Activity and Notes	Status
Beginning of December	Preliminary research for dissertation topic. Obtained a physical research diary and began to document my key interests, revolving around place-based learning, indigenous knowledge and environmental connection	Completed
End of December	Instigated a meeting with Dr Eszter Kovacs to discuss these ideas. Expressed my interest in doing fieldwork with indigenous populations but was made aware of these challenges involved with this, not least the ethical considerations. Advice was given to look closer to home	Completed
January	Read Alastair McIntosh book 'Soil and Soul' discussing deep ecology in the Scottish Highlands. Introduced me to the concept of Scottish Community Buy-outs through the case study of the Isle of Eigg, which seemed to be a fascinating lens through which to investigate place-based learning	Completed
End of January	Research began to focus in on the cases of Scottish buy-outs, refining the scope of the dissertation and beginning to evaluate how best to craft my ideas together. While an understanding of place-based connection was desirable, there was still uncertainty regarding the theoretical foundations and methodological approach	Completed
23 rd February	Attended a Science and Non-Duality (SAND) lecture over Zoom, chaired by their founders and indigenous leaders. Discussions revolved around land as a spiritual healer and helped frame some of the key questions I wanted to broach in my own dissertation	Completed
24 th February	Dissertation proposal was submitted, with main areas of interest. Initially revolving around the Isle of Eigg as the case of interest	Completed

28 th February	Continued to deepen my inquiry so sat in on a lecture initiated by the UCL department of Architecture titled 'Return of a Native'. Delivered by Vron Ware, the complexities of rural England were highlighted, thinking about not just the materiality of the soil but the memories embedded within them too. This helped sharpen my own focus on understandings of belonging and ecological stewardship	Completed
19 th March	1 st Supervisor Meeting with Eszter in which the initial proposal was reviewed and feedback was given. Research focus needed to be sharpened up and a suggestion of expanding the location scope was considered. Discussions around the potential of fieldwork, revealed the need to begin this exploration and a completed ethics form as soon as possible.	Completed
20 th March – 3 rd April	I began to dig deeper into Community Buy-outs. Researching government legislation, Scottish History, and the current reality of land ownership, I became aware of critical groups/people like Community Land Scotland and Andy Wightman. I also become ever more conscious of the increasing vulnerability and academic attention of these small communities.	Completed
4 th April	2 nd Supervisor Meeting with Eszter. With a better understanding of community buyouts, we discussed the difficulty in accessing them. She suggested I reach out to Alastair and Andy, to see if they have any advice. She also calmed any nerves over the dissertation, explaining that it doesn't need to be ground-breaking and the dissertation process doesn't need to be devoid of any feeling – something I struggled to comprehend with a science background	Completed
9 th April	Met with Alastair over zoom and made it clear the increasing academic attention given to Community buyouts makes access challenging. He said to offer your services and time to the community and don't expect anything in return. Worth looking at smaller buyouts that might be more receptive to academic study and volunteer	Completed

	<p>services. Was also given a 2025 Community Land Academic Network (CLAN) report that documented the experiences of communities with recent academics. It became obvious then, that if I wanted to do research in this field I was going to have to adopt non-conventional research approaches.</p>	
23 rd April	<p>Ethics form was submitted, to give ample time to get it approved and begin fieldwork organising. This process, alongside my research, has made me want to centre the experiences of the communities and ensure that my research is not extractive in any way. Because I wanted to be as sensitive as possible I used Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhills (2009) Research Onion to make sure I was reflecting on every stage. This sensitivity was present in my research from here on in.</p>	Completed
24 th – 28 th	<p>Using Community Land Scotland’s points of contact, I identified potential locations that offered a range of buyout variables and began to reach out to them using the techniques discussed with Alastair and Eszter. While aiming for around 2-3, I contacted many more as I was aware that not everyone would respond. I did this in batches of 5 to ensure that I was not overloaded with responses. I chose invitations from the following 3 community buyouts – Isle of Eigg, Evanton Wood, and Langholm Rewilding Site</p>	Completed
29 th April	<p>Met with CLAN at a quarterly meeting to hear stories about other researchers in the field and their investigations. Was not just in Scotland but all over the world and was very inspiring and motivating. Helped gain some insight into how to approach communities effectively.</p>	Completed
30 th April – 12 th May	<p>I started to finalise the focus of my dissertation in preparation for the presentation, settling on Socio-ecological resilience as the framework through which to investigate community buyouts. Alongside this I organised dates, points of contacts, and on site activities with the 3</p>	Completed

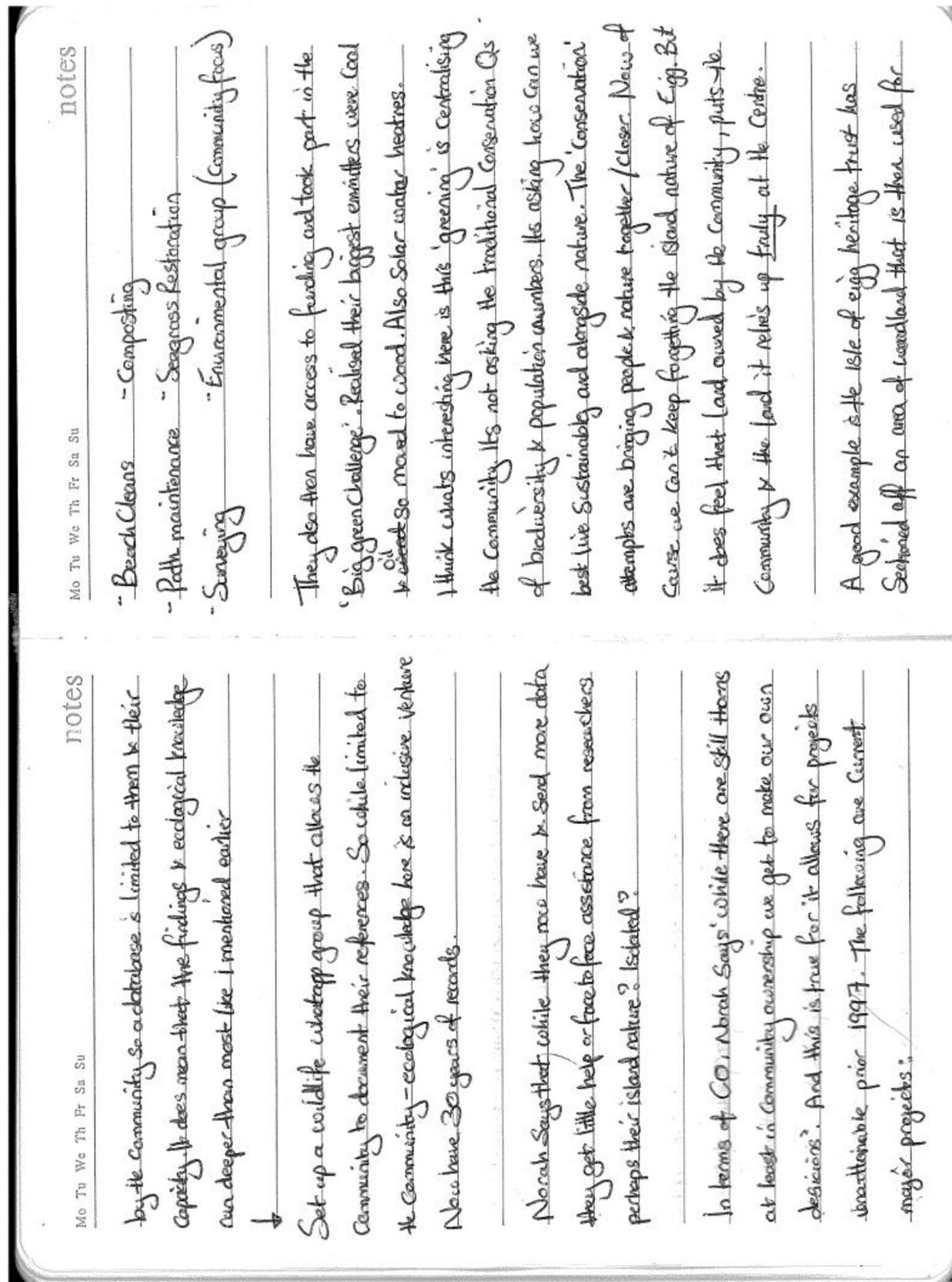
	case study locations for the first weeks of June. Adopting a snowballing approach I used my points of contact to find participants. Participant information Sheets, Consent forms and initial interview questions were finalised.	
13 th May	Presentation was uploaded. At this point in time, I aimed to collect data through observation and participation as I had not locked in any interviews nor was I sure if people would be receptive and I did not want to force this onto people. Consequently, the presentation based the data collection and analysis on observational data	Completed
15 th May	Presentation delivered	Completed
16 th – 31 st May	Because this research is an iterative process, I wanted to let the data guide me. However, I still wanted a deep understanding of the literature surrounding community buyouts and socio-ecological relationships. Therefore, I aimed to do as much research for the literature review as possible before I went into the field. While most of this was written down, it became evident that I had researched too much and too widely. However in a conversation with Eszter it became clear that better it be this way as I can then go back and take out all the bits that are unnecessary and develop the areas that are key. Also prepared camping, accommodation, transport (used my car) and other necessities for fieldwork	Completed
2 nd – 7 th June	Fieldwork was conducted on Isle of Eigg. Bad weather made the initial days pretty worrying, however I got to know a local crofters that let me stay in their Bothy. Spent my days participating in group activities such as community choir and wildlife walks, as well as making myself available in common areas such as the Community Tearoom and Brewery. 3 Sit-down interviews were conducted, while many more informal conversations were had and recorded in the physical research diary. What became apparent was that the interview questions needed to be changed	Completed

	and become better targeted, particularly to draw out more emotional answers in relation to land than material ones.	
7 th – 8 th June	Stayed in Inverness. This gave me time to reflect on the data and write up any further reflections on my time <i>in situ</i>	Completed
9 th – 10 th June	Worked at Evanton Wood. Took a tour of the site and interviewed my contact there. Was going to wild camp the night but was invited to stay in their shed. Consequently, I helped cut down Sitka spruce for a few hours the following morning to repay their kindness. Also took part in a school group, helping them light fires and chop wood. In addition, I worked at a local seed bank down the road to gain some ideas of what land connection might mean to them – for those of tenure outside of community ownership	Completed
10 th – 11 th June	Stayed in Edinburgh. It felt more and more obvious that the research needed months, if not years, to fully gain a true and honest picture of community buyouts. If I was to truly do these communities justice, they needed more of my time. Consequently, as lovely as everyone was, I felt slightly like an outsider and it naturally took time to build up trust and confidence in one another, something I didn't have the luxury of	Completed
11 th – 13 th June	Worked at the final buyout, Langholm. Received a tour of the site, worked with local school and brownie groups, and helped the volunteer group plant native trees. Got to know some of the local community while staying there through my point of contact, so followed up with meetings on my last day.	Completed
14 th – 22 nd June	Returned back and began to reflect on the data more, wrote up the methodology, and begin to transcribe the interviews. It became clear that the free-flowing nature of the research meant my data, although incredibly rich, was not conventional. It was at this point I dropped the notion of 'socio-ecological resilience' as it became apparent I was only holding on to it to try and make the research sound more scientific.	Completed

23 rd June	Because I had only just got back from my fieldwork, my research draft was submitted on the 23 rd June.	Completed
24 th June – 14 th July	During this period I waited to receive feedback on my draft. Due to complications, this was delayed by a month and so in the meantime I started to watch YouTube videos on NVivo. It was really complicated to begin with and I didn't know where to start, particularly as the data wasn't conventional. However, I chose to depart from my 3 key themes and once the ball was rolling, and the data sectioned off, it became much easier to see patterns and draw conclusions.	Completed
15 th July	My meeting with Eszter regarding the draft, illustrated that my writing had 'lost a bit of Alfie'. I think I agree with this as I had almost done too much research that it had become generalised. Needed to centre the Scottish context and be clearer about why this is so important, returning to my roots and passions about the project.	Completed
16 th July – 12 th August	I continued to write up my results, as well as my introduction. Once I got to my conclusion, I went back and was able to finalise my research questions. This felt like a backwards process to start with, but when I went back and changed them after I had analysed my data and it was all written down, it felt very satisfying and all together cohesive.	Completed
13 th – 25 th August	Needed to cut down the words by about 500 and begin to revise the final structure, thinking about graphs, abstract and formatting. I was away for the last two weeks of August so it needed to be done before then	Completed
29 th August	Final edits to make sure that everything is ok before it is submitted	Completed

Appendix III. Example of Physical Research Diary

Page below is in reference to The Isle of Eigg



Appendix IV. Initial Email Sent to Community Buy-Outs

Dear [Title] Community,

I hope this email finds you well!

Firstly, I just want to say that I know you must be inundated with emails and requests for people to come visit your community, so I wanted to take this first moment to just say I appreciate you taking the time to read this email. My name is Alfie, and I am a master's student currently studying at Environment Politics and Society at UCL. I have a background in biology, conservation and biodiversity management with an increasing focus on community-led responses to the climate crisis. – LinkedIn

This summer, I'm hoping to visit and volunteer and give my time to a community land initiative to better understand how community ownership is shaping both social and ecological relationships with land in Scotland. I would love the opportunity to spend 3-5 days helping out in any way I can — whether that's doing odd jobs, mucking in on things others might avoid, or simply lending a hand for you wherever is needed.

I'll be fully self-sufficient, camping and bringing my own supplies, and my priority is not to be a burden but to contribute. If, at the end of the stay, anyone has 15–30 minutes spare to chat about your community work and reflections on the buy-out journey, that would be incredibly valuable — but entirely optional.

I completely understand how often organisations like yours are approached by researchers, and I want to do this differently: by showing up, listening, and giving back.

Please do let me know if this might be of interest and thank you regardless for taking the time to consider the opportunity!

Thanks again,

Alfie

Appendix V. Participant Information Sheet

UCL DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Study:

Understanding Community Land Ownership in Scotland. Conservation, Community, and Belonging

Student researcher:

Alfie Highland

Alfredo.highland.24@ucl.ac.uk

Dissertation supervisor:

Ezster Kovacs

e.kovacs@ucl.ac.uk

I invite you to participate in this study, which is part of my Master's degree at UCL (University College London).

[What is the purpose of the study?](#)

The purpose of this study is to explore how community land ownership in Scotland shapes the everyday experiences, practices, and relationships of local residents with the land. By focusing on Scottish community buy-outs, the research aims to understand how community members engage in conservation, make collective decisions about land use, and develop a sense of belonging and connection to their environment. This study uses a socio-ecological perspective to look at how social and ecological factors are intertwined in community land ownership, moving beyond abstract theories to capture the lived realities of those involved. By listening to the voices and experiences of community members, the research hopes to provide a more

nuanced and grounded understanding of the opportunities and challenges that come with community ownership of land.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to take part in this research because you are involved in, or have experience with, a community land buyout. Your knowledge, perspectives, and lived experience are valuable in helping to understand how community ownership shapes governance, inclusion, and relationships with the land. This study aims to learn directly from those who are part of these communities, and your insights will play an important role in informing the research and its findings. This study will involve ~25 participants.

Do I have to take part?

No. The decision to participate is completely your own. You can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If you withdraw your data will be deleted and not used.

What will happen if I take part?

I shall record our conversation. It will remain informal and can last anywhere from 20-50 minutes. We can stop at any time or change topics if this is suitable. I hope to touch on topics similar to those below:

Your experience of the community land buyout, your involvement in the community and what land ownership means to you. I'm also interested in your relationship to the land and how the buyout has affected the use/types of activities on the land.

It will be an informal chat. I would like to record the interview using either audio voice recorder or video and audio. I can take notes instead if you would prefer not to be recorded. You will not be required to disclose any personal information or information that could make you identifiable unless you choose to do so. We can also conduct the interview by an exchange of emails/chats if you would prefer.

How will the recording or emails be used?

The recording will be used for my study. I may transcribe it but recordings, notes typed, and transcriptions will be held securely, on password-protected computers, and anonymised for analysis and writing up. Emails will be kept in a folder or file dedicated exclusively to this research. They will not be forwarded to anyone else.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

There are no identifiable risks associated with participation. Should you identify any risks or feel uncomfortable at any point we will stop the interview.

Will my taking part be confidential?

All information that I collect about you will be strictly confidential. It will not be possible to identify you in the resulting dissertation. However, should you choose to participate in a group discussion, other participants will hear what you say

What will happen to the results?

The results will contribute to my MSc dissertation, submitted to UCL for marking. A copy may be stored online by the department for internal use, but the dissertation will not be publicly accessible. The results could contribute to an article submitted to an academic journal. It will not be possible to identify you from anything published.

What will happen to my data?

Once my degree has been awarded, all your data (recordings, transcriptions and emails) will be destroyed.

What if something goes wrong?

If you would like further information or wish to make a complaint about this study you can contact my supervisor (see above) or the Chair of the Board of Examiners (Dr Pushpa Arabindoo p.arabindoo@ucl.ac.uk or Prof Chris Brierley c.brierley@ucl.ac.uk)

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study!

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The data controller for this project will be UCL (University College London). All efforts will be made to anonymise your data completely. The UCL Data Protection Office oversees UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and if you are concerned about how your personal data are being processed you can contact them at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/>

Appendix VI. Consent Form

Understanding Community Land Ownership in Scotland. Conservation, Community, and Belonging

Participant Consent Form

If you are happy to participate please complete the consent form below and either sign one copy and hand it back to me, or, if the interview is to be online, return it to me Alfie Highland at alfredo.highland.24@ucl.ac.uk as an email attachment

I have received the information sheet on the above project and consent to participate in:

Please Specify Below:

(Please tick all that apply)

- An individual interview – Online
- An individual interview – In Person
- A group interview – Online
- A group interview – In Person

Please Specify Below:

(Please tick as relevant.)

I do not consent for the interview to be audio recorded

I consent for the interview to be audio recorded

I consent to be interviewed by email

I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, that it will not be possible to identify me from any information provided in the dissertation, and that the study will follow the guidelines in the information sheet.

Returning this form to me by email will constitute consent to participate as described above.

Name of participant:

(typed/electronic signature)

Date:

Appendix VII. Original and Revised Interview Questions and Format

Original

Conservation:

1. How has 'conservation' (land management) changed since the buyout? Are there things that are now required of you
2. Has Natural Capital played a role at all in the way you manage the land?
3. How do you as a community collect biodiversity data?
4. Do you worry about having to face larger, more external influences of climate change that you can't control?
5. How much help do you get on conservation outside of the immediate community?

Community:

1. What has been easier/harder since community ownership?
2. Do you think peoples attitudes to nature has changed over time?
3. Do some people play more of a role in governance than others?
4. How has the community changed (if at all) since the buyout
5. Are their tensions on land use?

Belonging:

1. Since community ownership has what the land means to you changed? Do you feel more driven to protect it?
2. Do you think community ownership has helped create a strong sense of identity

What do you think the future holds for you and community land ownership in Scotland?

Revised

Introduction Conversation

1. If you were to describe a 'typical day' on the land now, how would you set the scene?
a) What sights, sounds, or feelings stand out for you?
2. I would love to hear about the very first time you realised 'X' was going to be community owned. How did it feel?
3. When you hear the phrase 'community ownership', what goes through your head?

Conservation:

1. Can you tell me about a particular project or moment that you feel proud of under community ownership?
 - a) *Why?*
2. Has there been any challenging moments where you have had to balance daily life with conservation goals?
3. Some people talk about putting a price of nature, what does 'X's nature mean to you?

Community:

1. In what ways are decisions about [Insert relevant land governance] now the community's responsibility?
 - a) *How are these decisions made?*
 - b) *Has that shift felt empowering or sometimes overwhelming?*
2. If you close your eyes and imagine 'X' in 10 years, what do you think it will look like?
 - a) *What decisions do you think the community will be making?*
 - b) *How do you think it will change?*

Belonging:

1. If I asked you why you feel at home here – what would you say?
 - a) *Is there somewhere on 'X' you feel most yourself?*
 - b) *Has this changed since ownership?*
2. How have the stories and history of 'X' shape how you see yourself as a community member today?
 - a) *Do you ever feel a tension between honouring old stories and creating new ones?*

Community ownership in Scotland is part of a bigger movement. When you think about how 'X's story might inspire – or caution – other communities. What would you most want to share?

Appendix VIII. Sample Interview Transcript

Extract from interview with Participant G: 12/06/2025 - 36 minutes

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Interviewer: So do you think the government were against it because it was so big?

Participant: I think that because we were small communities, it makes sense for us to do it together. And in a way, it is logical. But it just didn't happen that way. So we decided we would go for it ourselves. They gave us the guidelines, what we had to do in order to tick the boxes, to trigger the support from them. So we had to produce a business plan. That's the first thing. And I think you'll have seen a copy of it. Which was very well put together. And all praise to Kevin and to vice chair who was John Hanrerhan. John had a City of London background. He'd worked in you know, the stock exchange. In a different line altogether, but he did have a house in the area. And he had great business experience, so I was guided. I was the enthusiast, but they were the business head and so forth.

Interviewer: And so, when all that fundraising felt like it was gonna be a big stretch, was there an instant when you thought, oh my god, we might actually pull this off?

Participant: To be to be perfectly honest. From the get go after we had got the support, we had to get the support of the neighbouring community, DG 13-14. So that was Canonby. We had to go out and we had to, get at least 10% of the community behind us for the buyout. And we got 25. And we did that in less than a fortnight, just knocking on doors. So that was a boost. I never had any doubts that we would get the money. It just never entered my head that we would have failed to get it.

Kevin tapped the big funders. He went to the John Muir Trust and they pointed him in the direction of other multinational funders. And they covered the planet as it were. They weren't all British.

There was multinational companies amongst them which was interesting. But they produced the millions. But the thing that really interested me was the smaller folk that came forward whose hearts were really in it.

Interviewer: And why do you think those people did that? What do you think community ownership meant for the community?

Participant: Well, tale I've told very many times. A tiny school in Glasgow, whose head teacher was an eco-warrior. And she took her kids from Central Glasgow out on litter cleans and beach cleans and all the rest of it. Read about it. Felt we want to do something to help us. And they did a sponsored hop skit and jump to raise money and I think they raised about \$250 pounds. It wasn't a huge sum of money, it was hundreds. But their hearts were in it. And we stayed with them ever since. We've had them down here. They were most recently here in March to celebrate the ponds. And they were so excited about the frogspawn and the plants. And of course they got to plant trees.

The time before that the weather was atrocious. We had been going to do a sheep gathering, but we did it in a shed rather than in the open. And, we entertained them at Kronk's Bank for lunch and so forth. There were only eight kids and their teachers. And, I said to one wee boy

'Did you enjoy, the sheep'

'The sheep were fantastic. So were the ducks. But, my God, those sheep are awful smelly.'

You know, a typical child. Central Glasgow. Who had never been exposed to the smelly sheep. But I learned on the visit this time from one of the wee girls who stuck with me like glue.

And she said, 'oh my big brother, he was here the last time. He's in secondary school now. And he always speaks about coming to Langholm'.

So it had stuck with them

Interviewer: And so you think the community were inspired by that?

Participant: Yes. And then there was a local chap who, obviously, we did the crowd funder, and he stopped me on the street, very shy chap, and he said, 'how do I contribute to the buyout without having to go on a crowd funder?' He didn't have a laptop or anything. And I said, 'oh, you could write us a check. We don't object to cheques.'

'Who do I address it to?

So I wrote it down for him, what he had to write on the cheque, the heading, etcetera. And he said, 'oh, I'll put it through the letterbox.' Now at that time, we were using welcome to Langholm, where the antiques man is now in the square. We were in there. That was our tourist office. And, sure enough, later in the day, I passed, and I thought, I better just check whether that envelope's been put through the letter box. And sure enough, here was the envelope. Opened the envelope and said, 'Oh, that's very generous a month. Thought it made a 100 pounds you see. And then went on the walk with the dog, got back into the house and had another look at it. And it wasn't a 100 pounds or a thousand, it was 10,000 pounds.

And this is a chap. You would pass him on the street and never notice him. As quiet as a mouse, has no other outside interests and he's been generous since then. He's interested. For Instance, was it Commonwealth Games or the Olympic Games? There was a torch being passed. And it was the lady runners from the area that collected it at one point and were carrying it through the town and passing it on. And he was at the reception in the background, as is his boy, he was there to see this happen.

Interviewer: Do you think they were interested in the nature of the moor, the trees? Well, not him specifically, but...

Participant: Oh, yes. He loves the loves the area. You know his homeland. And there'll be somebody who doesn't vocalize about his feelings.

Interviewer: And bring it back to community and bring it back into community ownership. I can imagine is empowering for the community as well.

Participant: And it has so much history. If you go far enough back to prehistoric times and then to early Christian times. We have a well that was created by one of the early Christian missionaries. So it has all these connections. And even though not every towns person is aware of that, you know, they're there.

Interviewer: Is there a particular project or moment that you feel most proud of about the community ownership project? Is there anything in particular?

Participant: I think on the official handover day from the Buccleuch Estates to ourselves. Now we were out of the worst of COVID, by the way, and you've got to remember as well that most of the fundraising was done through COVID.

And I think for everybody that heard about it one way or another, and we had wonderful help from a journalist and an environmental director, Richard Bunting. He was absolutely superb at getting information out there to people. So all honour to Richard you know, for doing that for us. And he did it free of charge. Just because he sensed the commitment that we had. At that came through from COVID, we want a good news story.

I mean, there are other funders as well that I could speak of. But those two are great examples

Interviewer: And when that handover happened, how did that feel?

Participant: Well, what happened was, I had a connection with a member of the pipe band, and this chap was is a very good writer of pipe music. And he had done a job for me previously, a commission. And I said 'do you think you could produce something for us for the handover?' So we have our own piece of music. It's recorded in the piece that Inigo put together for us, the film.

Interviewer: And how did it how did it feel being able to...

Participant: It was a joyous moment, really, you know. It really was a joyous moment. That we've completed this. We've done the first buyout. We've succeeded with that. We've completed the second bit, and now is the handover. So it was a case of we are now custodians. And I think the relationships that, hopefully, we're building with both our tenants on the moor and with our working family - to everyone's benefit.

Interviewer: So from the opposite side of the spectrum, that even in small towns, everyone's got differing opinions, you know, everyone does. So maybe over land use or grazing or whatever. So what are the challenges that I guess you've seen from that?

Participant: Well we've had as many public consultations as we can accommodate. Yes. There were people that said we shouldn't have paid 6,000,000. That Buccleuch should have given us it. But you've got to look at it for the point of view that initially, the Buccleuch was given land by the monarch. They acquired lands. Apart from that it was known up until this sale was announced, they acquired land or bought land- they never sold. And here they were in a reversed position, you know. But up until then they had given people livelihoods, either as tenants or as workers. They provided trade training for an awful lot of, hundreds of folk. They provided accommodation for people. So you know, you cannot ignore that and say they should give you it. It (land) has a value. And although one of the conditions of the Scottish government money was that... Buccleuch had put a valuation on it. We had a valuation. We had to set aside so much of the money that they gave us initially, in case we had to go to court if we didn't agree. So we had a set aside just in case. But as it happened, we managed to work. It came down from a very high level with Buccleuch. To something that we felt was doable.

Appendix IX. Community Buy-Out Roadmap

