



Dr Jim Hansom showing the children from Castlebay school the effects of coastal erosion

## Islanders tackle a 'rapid and dramatic' land loss

WORKSHOPS designed to help islanders come up with ideas to lessen the impact of coastal erosion in their communities have been hailed a success – but people taking part say more needs to be done.

The workshops were held as part of an innovative Scottish Government-funded pilot project supported by the Lochboisdale Amenity Trust (LAT) and Oxfam Scotland.

Dr Jim Hansom of Glasgow University talked with crofters and local people in Vatersay, Barra, South Uist, Benbecula and North Uist whose land is affected by coastal erosion and flooding.

Mr Hansom put the issues facing the Western Isles into a global context before focusing on practical methods to lessen the impact of coastal threats.

As a result, four local projects are now underway. In Barra and Vatersay, as well as South and North Uist, local people are erecting fencing to exclude stock from areas of the coastal edge and machair that are particularly at risk from erosion.

In Benbecula five miles of drainage channels have been cleared to help protect low-lying areas and better evacuate flood water. And in Grenitote measures are being taken to stop tidal erosion.

Jim Hansom said: "The communities of the west coasts of the Western Isles are facing real challenges due to coastal and dune erosion driven mainly by

sea level rise, storm waves and reduced sediment supply.

"Moving from mitigation measures that will slow erosion toward an adaptational mind-set was identified in the workshops as a real challenge for crofters and local communities as well as for local authority planners, land managers and national bodies such as SNH and the Crofting Commission."

The LAT and Oxfam Scotland now plan to work further with local communities, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Scottish Government and other agencies to draw up an action plan.

This will look at what funding and resources are available to help communities continue this work, as well as giving people the chance to come up with new ways of using the land sustainably in the context of ongoing issues with sea level, erosion and land use.

Donald MacPhee, chair of the LAT, said: "When you have an overview of what is taking place on the machair shore, the scale of the problem which is facing the southern isles is, frankly, worrying."

"The presentation from Jim Hansom was excellent in putting the cause and effect of coastal problems in the islands in context, both at local and at international level.

"If there is one lesson to be had from the pilot project it is that the community is very capable of addressing local issues if they are

given the support and resources to do so.

"The longer term is another story which was – at the very least – brought into focus with adaptive solutions aired."

Gerard MacDonald of the Barra and Vatersay Trust was one of the people to attend a workshop.

He said: "As the sea rises we will have to accept loss of land and that on occasion, in a given area, it will be rapid and dramatic."

"The workshop was for me the first time I have heard of adaptation to change as a forward strategy. It is good to get this idea onto the table, it will take time to normalise in folk's minds and they may be prepared to engage with it in years ahead. The sooner we start thinking, the better our adaption response will be."

Angus MacDonald of the Benbecula Flood Action Group said: "Praise must be given to the LAT for their skills in getting groups together – groups that recognise the damage that has been done to our infrastructure."

"Oxfam has mature people on their team capable of solving problems with simple solutions."

The pilot project also focused on teaching young people about the impact of rising sea levels and erosion. Dr Hansom used his 'Geomorphology Roadshow' to raise the issues with eight primary and secondary classes in Castlebay School, Barra.