



guardian.co.uk

As oil prices soar, crofters return to the old ways and get their heat from peat

Severin Carrell, Scotland correspondent

The Guardian, Monday May 5 2008



Islanders Alastair and Alex Macleod extract peat on Lewis. Photograph: Murdo Macleod

The soaring price of fuel is leading cash-conscious crofters in the Outer Hebrides to revive the ancient tradition of cutting peat to fire their kitchen stoves and central heating. Over the past few months the steep surge in the price of oil, now routinely used by residents on islands such as Lewis, has led to a rush in orders for traditional, hand-made peat cutters and peat-cutting permits.

Some crofters are re-installing peat-burning stoves alongside oil-burning stoves and combi-boilers, or even using them as a replacement heating source.

Calum Macleod, 73, a blacksmith in Stornoway, whose father began making the 12in (30cm) peat cutters by hand in the 1920s, said orders for the tools had risen sixfold over the past few weeks. He has made nearly 40 cutters this year, compared with the six he made last year. Orders are still arriving.

"This year they've really snowballed," Macleod said. "I reckon it's the price of fuel. With prices going up, I was thinking, oh well, they may be wanting peat irons this year; then it turned out true enough. People were saying to me, 'I'll cut peat this year to help out'."

Known as tarasgeirs in Gaelic the standard peat iron he makes has a hefty foot-long blade clasped by a long wooden handle. There are variations on the design: in Shetland the blades are roughly 6in long and diggers are helped by the addition of a small foot-hold or stirrup on the cutter's side.

For most of the crofters peat cutting began this weekend, the May bank holiday. The activity was once central to life across the Highlands and Islands; each spring families would spend long days cutting out and stacking rectangular bricks of peat from their peat banks, piling them up to dry as fuel for use during the following winter. That tradition almost entirely died out with the electrification of Scotland's remotest areas and the availability of the more efficient oil-fired combi-boilers. Households have had their peat fires bricked up, and peat-burning stoves and peat irons have been discarded.

But this year the price of oil has doubled, rising to more than 57p a litre on Lewis, and driving families back to the peat.

Alasdair Macleod, a crofter in Shawbost, on the west coast of Lewis, said he had had six people "chasing him", wanting to buy his mother's Stanley Superstar peat-burning stove, which is hefty enough to heat a domestic water supply and six radiators. The buyer, a local man, needed a cheaper source of fuel for his father, who required heat all year round. The stove will be connected to the

household's heating system.

There are concerns, however, about the environmental impact of the trend. Iain MacIver, chairman of the Stornoway Trust, one of Lewis's largest landowners, said that since the cessation of peat-cutting most of the peatlands had won protection under wildlife legislation. And most peat banks available outside the traditionally cut areas were already heavily depleted. "There's nowhere left, unless we start getting into the designated zones," he said.

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008