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Interpreting Environments: Interest Group Response to Population Ecology Pressures

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Important articles in this *Journal* by Nownes in 2004 and Nownes and Lipinksi in 2005 demonstrate that 'population ecology' approaches are now central to interest group studies. Partly at least this move to study at population level is a consequence of the numbers of such organizations. Party scholars typically deal with far fewer cases and sui generis discussion is more defensible. Ecology seems to offer a 'handle' on the thousands of cases that exist in the interest group field. Nownes and Lipinski stressed the importance of environmental factors in determining group populations, and challenged group scholars to address the dynamics among interest group populations. This article argues that animal-based population ecology may be an imperfect analogy to use in making sense of group circumstances. It considers the way groups respond to opportunities and constraints.

Pursuing Nownes and Lipinski's invitation to look at dynamics in particular settings, this article stresses the 'shaping' roles of group leaders through an exploration of the way the dominant Scottish farming group mediated the impact of external changes over the past decade. It concludes that while approaches based on population ecology rightly emphasize system implications of competition for scarce resources in creating group challenges, the *manner* in which particular organizations adapt and transform is crucial. Mortality is not inevitable. This article thus builds on those elements within the ecological tradition that accept a place for agency. Ideas such as 'mortality anxiety', as used by Gray and Lowery,[1] or 'survival tactics', discussed by Imig,[2] show that biological models do not make straightforward metaphors for understanding human-engineered structures.

REGULATING INTEREST GROUP POPULATIONS

Elaborating *how* groups form is now a significant theme in the group literature. The issue of *emergence* is seen as distinct from maintenance. Recently, however, there has been greater interest in morbidity/death as affecting overall numbers in existence. Early observers, such as Truman[3] and Latham[4], saw groups emerge in a semi-automatic

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[1] Virginia Gray and David Lowery, 'Life in a Niche: Mortality Anxiety Among Organized Interests in the Unites States', *Political Research Quarterly*, 80 (1997), 25–47.

[2] Douglas Imig, 'Survival, Resource Mobilization and Survival Tactics of Poverty Advocacy Groups', *Western Political Quarterly*, 45 (1992), 501–20.

[3] David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process* (New York: Knopf, 1951).

[4] Earl Latham, *The Group Basis of Politics: A Study in Basing-Point Legislation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1952).

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way – naturally reflecting shared sets of concern: group formation 'happened'. Salisbury summarized the commonplace assumption that 'like-minded people join together to enhance their political power in order to achieve public policies that serve their common interests'.[5] Schlozman similarly summarized this broadly held view that 'interest groups emerge more or less automatically in response to environmental changes that render necessary the representation of new political interests'.[6] These early mobilization assumptions were refined by scholars such as Beer, arguing that the post-Second World War extension of the welfare state acted as a catalyst for group formation, and that group emergence was sometimes stimulated and supported to generate structures that could assist government with its objectives.[7] Thus the early group assumptions were that social, political and economic structures provided opportunities which shaped group start-up.

Rational choice approaches provided the most significant challenge to the 'autopilot' theories of group emergence.[8] Olson argued that consensus among individuals around a set of group goals did not necessarily lead to collective action: the rational behaviour of potential members (whose contribution would not be pivotal) is to free ride unless there are selective individual-level incentives. From an Olsonian perspective, the failure of a specific group to materialize in a position representing shared views might reflect the lack of selective incentives for potential members, not an absence of consensus on shared interests. Salisbury addressed group origins (especially the role of entrepreneurs); and Walker described the importance of patronage as a factor in group emergence.[9] By comparison, there has been little attention to overall group numbers. Is there a limit on the number of groups in any one domain and, if so, by what mechanisms are they regulated?

A series of contributions under the label of 'Population Ecology' (PE) has opened up the issue of the regulation of group populations.[10] An important initial claim is that an assumption of infinite growth in niches and numbers of associated groups is unrealistic; rather, group birth and death rates need attention.[11] Lowery and Gray argue, 'The forces

[5] Robert H. Salisbury, 'Interest Representation: The Dominance of Institutions', *American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984), 64–76, p. 66.

[6] Kay L. Schlozman, 'What Accent the Heavenly Chorus? Political Equality and the American Pressure Group System', *Journal of Politics*, 46 (1984), 1006–32, p. 1007.

[7] Samuel Beer, *Britain Against Itself* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982). An example here was the Scottish Women's Rural Institute that was initially run by the Ministry of Agriculture.

[8] Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

[9] Robert H. Salisbury, 'An Exchange Theory of Interest Groups', *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 13 (1969), 1–32; Jack L. Walker, *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

[10] The following are particularly relevant: David Lowery and Virginia Gray, 'The Population Ecology of Gucci Gulch, or the Natural Regulation of Interest Group Numbers in the American States', *American Journal of Political Science*, 39 (1995), 1–29; David Lowery and Virginia Gray, 'Bias in the Heavenly Chorus: Interests in Society and Before Government', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 16 (2004), 5–30; Virginia Gray and David Lowery, *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation: Lobbying Communities in the American States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, paperback edn, 2000 [1996]); Anthony J. Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation: Mobilizing Gay and Lesbian Rights Interest Groups in the Unites States, 1950–98', *British Journal of Political Science*, 34 (2004), 49–67; Anthony J. Nownes and Daniel Lipinski, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Death: Gay and Lesbian Rights Interest Groups in the Unites States, 1945–98', *British Journal of Political Science*, 35 (2005), 303–19.

[11] Gray and Lowery, *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation*, p. 20.

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that sustain and change observed populations of interest organizations before government are only loosely – and very complexly – connected to the distribution of interests in society'.[12] In this conclusion, the PE approach contradicts the early group theorists. Instead, it argues that creating groups is easier as legitimation increases. This term referred to the development of a 'taken-for-granted' acceptance of group emergence.[13] In other words, when groups are scarce, one constraint is the need for *de novo* argumentation and explanation – but once the formula of group action is accepted, then the start-up resistance is less. However, PE also posits that environments offer 'carrying capacity' constraints that will increase group competition as group numbers increase.[14] Thus initially a rise in density eases group mobilization (provides legitimation), but ultimately group saturation reintroduces problems (competition based). To summarize, the main contention of PE is (in contrast to earlier group theorists) that the pattern of interests in society will not translate simply into the pattern of group mobilization. The opportunities for groups are dependent on the state of the relevant group world.

Borrowing from population and organizational ecology, Lowery and Gray propose that an understanding of group populations is best achieved not by looking simply at the individual group level traits and characteristics (such as formation issues and incentive structures), but by examining group environments.[15] The key biologically-derived insight is that rates of mobilization (group birth) tell little about group populations. Lowery and Gray cite Colinvaux, 'The way an animal breeds has very little to do with how many of it there are … The numbers that may live are set by the environment, and these are quite independent of how fast a species makes babies'.[16]

Thus the density in an interest group system is set not simply by a group's ability to overcome incentive issues, but by the opportunities inherent in the environment for group survival.[17] Key factors shaping group populations include: shifts in governmental agendas, shifts in the size (and heterogeneity) of a given constituency, and the density of groups seeking to represent a given set of similar interests (what they term 'interest guilds'). These factors contribute to 'the ultimate contours of organized-interest populations' by ensuring that not all groups born survive – and by creating feedback mechanisms that dampen the group birth-rate.[18] In 1995 they cite examples such as Pennsylvania, which had sixty-nine registered banking interest groups, while Arkansas had only eleven – but with similar numbers of banks.

One problem in the application of the ecological idea is the scope considered in the analysis. Some studies have fairly tightly limited populations – such as banking groups or poverty advocates, and in these circumscribed examples, the ecological factors seem persuasive. But the exercise is much more complex if the 'window' is expanded to business lobbies or cause groups; what are 'like groups'? Population ecology is concerned with 'specified populations' but how the population is specified is important.[19] A group may

[12] Lowery and Gray, 'Bias in the Heavenly Chorus', pp. 23–4.
[13] Hannan quoted by Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 53.
[14] Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 54.
[15] Lowery and Gray, 'The Population Ecology of Gucci Gulch', p. 9.
[16] Lowery and Gray, 'The Population Ecology of Gucci Gulch', p. 3; Paul Colinvaux, *Why Big Fierce Animals are Rare: An Ecologist's Perspective* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 12.
[17] Lowery and Gray,'The Population Ecology of Gucci Gulch', p. 9.
[18] Lowery and Gray,'The Population Ecology of Gucci Gulch', p. 24.
[19] Hannan and Freeman quoted by Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 52.

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appear in a very competitive niche, but if it is seen, or (re)presents itself, differently its mortality is constrained by a different environmental context. Indeed, as this article will establish, one group skill is precisely to define itself so that competition is reduced. Both in terms of member recruitment and policy influence monopoly is usually an ambition. This ability for groups to make choices in the competitions they enter undermines some of the parallels with ecology.

Aldrich notes:

> Ecological research has been primarily concerned with aggregates of organizations, and thus it has downplayed the role of individual actors and their interpretations … Ecologists with a population level focus thus purposefully neglect individuals in organizations, decision-making processes, and the micro-processes linking environments to organizations.[20]

The case study reported here returns the level of analysis to the micro-level on the assumption that high-level trends do not impact uniformly in particular cases.

In their 1995 article Lowery and Gray reacted to Olson's suggestion that 'Stable societies with unchanged boundaries tend to accumulate … organizations for collective action over time'.[21] The ecological approach queries the assumption of steady and irresistible accretion of groups. At some point density becomes harmful to groups. Nownes in 2004, and later with Lipinski, reported on group density and birth and death rates in gay and lesbian rights groups in the United States. For birth rates he found that initially they rose as the density of groups rose, but that after a time density grew to such a point that birth rates slowed.[22] He explained that the first groups act as innovators, establishing that their form of organization is 'legitimate', hence making organizations that copy the mould more credible to their would-be supporters. Yet density built to a tipping point, after which birth became very hard.[23] In terms of death rates, Nownes and Lipinski found that as group density (the number of gay rights groups) increased, the death rate increased.[24] They found mortality rates among groups was low at low rates of density, but increased as density increased. Further, they found that younger groups were often the first to die: as density increased, those most vulnerable were the newer groups. This 'last in, first out' principle is what they called the 'liability of adolescence'.[25]

These conclusions provide useful rules-of-thumb with respect to how group populations are regulated. Yet precisely how these environmental changes (including density and energy) impact on a particular group (and guilds of groups) is less than clear.[26] As Nownes has explained, a fundamental assumption of this approach is that 'change in the organizational world is primarily a function of organizational selection rather than organizational adaptation'.[27] As such, 'organizational ecologists focus on organizational populations rather than individual organizations'.[28] In the context of groups, the components of an organizational population (i.e. a species guild) would be affected similarly

[20] Aldrich, *Organizations Evolving*, p. 46.
[21] Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 82.
[22] Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation'.
[23] Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 66.
[24] Nownes and Lipinski, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Death'.
[25] Nownes and Lipinski, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Death', p. 318.
[26] See Howard Aldrich, *Organizations Evolving* (London: Sage, 2001), pp. 43–8.
[27] Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 32.
[28] Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 32.

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by the same environmental changes.[29] The claim made is that population has an *independent* effect on group death and birth.

Aldrich argues:

> Ecologists tend to treat the coherence of organizations as entities as relatively non-problematic, based on their assumption that organizations are relatively structurally inert. The assumption of structural inertia underlies the principle that *selection, rather than adaptation*, drives population level change. Populations change because of differential mortality, not because organizations live forever by adapting to each change that comes along.[30]

Yet, as set out by Lowery and Gray in 1995, Darwin talked both about *selection* and *adaptation*. Unlike animal comparisons, group leaders can consciously respond to environments and fast-track adaptation. In practice, the manipulative 'fingers' of interest-group leaders and managers surely shape the observed population levels? Indeed, Nownes has pointed out: 'Our findings simply suggest that entrepreneurs (and for that matter members and patrons) are *affected by ecological* constraints'.[31] Elsewhere he has elaborated:

> The organizational ecology framework explicitly acknowledges that individual entrepreneurs play an important role in determining the fortunes of individual organizations … [organizational ecologists] point out, however, that this activity is substantially affected by population dynamics – changes in density in particular … the larger environment in which entrepreneurs, potential entrepreneurs, supporters and potential supporters operate sends these actors signals about the life chances of organizations.[32]

Our theme has a different emphasis to those of Nownes, Lowery and the others, but there is not head-on disagreement. This article suggests that leaders make sense of, and respond to, ecological signals. Groups seek to adapt, transform or redefine themselves (including relabelling) to avoid mortality. While the ecology approach de-emphasizes organizational replication, adaptation and transformation, this article seeks to underline them.

In Nownes's work group guilds are defined objectively – for example, gay and lesbian groups – and counted within a fixed issue boundary. Though this may be a practical simplification, it may lead to an important distortion. For Nownes, the boundary of an interest guild is held static: this precludes the possibility of a group (or groups) actively redefining or spanning guilds. In a specific environment, however, groups can construct new opportunities, thus a group facing pressure can choose to look for distinctive features within the general niche. Thus, the Ramblers' Association in Britain in 2007 emerged in opposition to wind farms in the environmental niche. Such a detail underlines the emphasis on adaptation and transformation of individual organizations.

We are arguing that the population ecology approach may understate the significance of organizational adaptation and transformation (via individual group leaders' reactions) in response to challenging conditions. Other work has emphasized the role of leaders in constructing conditions that make eliciting support easier[33] and in managing member

[29] Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 32.
[30] Aldrich, *Organizations Evolving*, p. 45, emphasis added.
[31] Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 67, emphasis added.
[32] Nownes and Lipinski, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Death', p. 319.
[33] See Grant Jordan and William Maloney, 'Manipulating Membership: Supply Side Influences Over Group Size', *British Journal of Political Science*, 28 (1998), 389–409; Terry Moe, *The Organization of Interests* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

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mobilization in politically useful ways.[34] Some studies have also tried to look at the way groups make sense of and respond to changing circumstances.[35] However, the area is underdeveloped. Imig's case study of poverty advocacy groups has already found non-uniform response to challenge:[36]

> For one group, budget reductions forced organizational retrenchment, while for another, budget reductions led to an increased fundraising and new issue domains. One group with an expanding budget shifted its policy agenda to less confrontational issues in order to maintain a stream of resources, while a second, flush with resources, employed lobbying tactics new to the social welfare sector to pursue an agenda particularly confrontational to governmental institutions.

Such results suggest a place for group agency in accounting for survival, and, moreover, on the particular interpretations of leaders.

Centrally, this article suggests the determination of group numbers is in part explained by leaders who can map out viable organizational futures *despite* environmental changes. External changes can be interpreted in ways that reinforce survival. A long-standing and basic interest group question has concerned the impact of lean times or good times on constituencies. Do farmers join when they are resource rich or do they join when they have fewer resources and maybe see the value of political action more clearly? This example indicates that the impact of environmental changes can be non-intuitive. Imig sees a reduction in the number of poverty advocacy groups during the Reagan administration as highlighting the vulnerability of such interests, but a reduction in number could reflect increased concentration (effectiveness rather than failure).[37]

Nownes sets out the strength of incentive theory as an explanation for group emergence. Unlike the automatic assumptions of Truman, Olson set out how leaders offer incentives to members in exchange for support.[38] In his 2005 account with Lipinski, Nownes says:

> organizational ecology proceeds from the assumption that adaptive change within organizations is rare. As such, organizational ecology holds that most change in the organizational world takes place at the population level through the process of selection, rather than at the organizational level through the process of adaptation.[39]

Our premise in this article is that adaptation is perfectly consistent with the incentive approach. Group leaders may be agents acting to ensure group survival. We use qualitative methods to look at how general trends and pressures impact at case-study level. Gray and

[34] Darren Halpin, 'Action Frames and Incentive Management in Farmer Interest Groups: Changing the Logic of Collective Action', in George Crowder, Haydon Manning, David Mathieson, Andrew Parkin and Leonard Seabrooke, eds, *Public Proceedings of the Australian Political Studies Association 1997 Conference* (Adelaide: Flinders University of South Australia, 1997), pp.313–35.

[35] See G. Jordan and W. Maloney (with Sara Davidson), 'Making Interests: Creating Members', in G. Jordan and W. Maloney, eds, *Democracy and Interest Groups* (Basingstoke, Hants.: Palgrave, 2007), chap. 3. With respect to general agricultural groups in Europe, Australia and North America, see Darren Halpin, ed., *Surviving Global Change? Agricultural Interest Groups in Comparative Perspective* (Aldershot, Surrey: Ashgate, 2005).

[36] Imig, *Survival, Resource Mobilization and Survival Tactics of Poverty Advocacy Groups*, p. 517.

[37] Imig, *Survival, Resource Mobilization and Survival Tactics of Poverty Advocacy Groups*.

[38] Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 50.

[39] Michael T. Hannan and Glenn R. Carroll, 'An Introduction to Organizational Ecology', in Glenn R. Carroll and Michael T. Hannan, eds, *Organizations in Industry: Strategy, Structure, and Selection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 17–31; cited by Nownes and Lipinski, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Death', p. 304.

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Lowery themselves have stressed that, 'the changes in value of these quite general variables experienced by specific lobbying organizations' and 'especially in terms of how they influence an organization's decision to disband or to become politically inactive' after all 'cannot be studied with the kind of data employed here'.[40] Furthermore, Nownes is insistent that the logical development of the population ecology approach is towards a holistic approach to group analysis, which embraces existing approaches, acknowledges the role of leaders *but* critically accepts the role of environmental change and populations.[41] In this article, we have tried to complement their quantitative broad brush with case-study detail, and in so doing raise the question of group adaptation and transformation in pursuit of survival.

THE CASE STUDY

We are assuming that the processes that affect population size are context-based. We centre on the specific case of agriculture in Scotland. The orthodox thesis with respect to groups in agriculture in Britain is that the National Farmers' Union (NFU) dominates the representation of agricultural interests.[42] For Scotland, the equivalent dominant organization is NFU Scotland (NFUS). The NFUS shows how a broad group – and an incumbent group – perceives, and then seeks to adapt to and utilize changes in its environment.

The first part of this section of the article explores the major changes in the environment. There were two main challenges. First, there was a reduction in number of potential members through farm amalgamation and a reduction in incomes that made contributions more visible. Secondly, there was the opening up of the policy space as the government reframed issues as rural and environmental rather than agricultural: NFUS was left with the possibility of dominating a redundant niche.

The second part explores the ways in which the NFUS 'reads' and then addresses these environmental changes. In contrast to the population ecology assumptions that organizations do *not* change and that there are 'strong inertial forces … that limit the amount and degree of change',[43] the article records significant adapative behaviour. In Imig's language there are 'survival tactics'. We document the initial proliferation of 'flash' groups as governmental redefinition appeared to offer group growth opportunities. As the PE approach predicts, groups appear able to 'sniff out' where the emerging political attention is turning and move to occupy the emerging space.

[40] Gray and Lowery, *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation*, p. 250.

[41] Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation'.

[42] Graham Cox, Philip Lowe and Michael Winter, 'Agriculture and Conservation in Britain: A Policy Community Under Siege', in Graham Cox, Philip Lowe and Michael Winter, eds, *Agriculture: People and Policies* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), chap. 11, at p. 181; Martin J. Smith, 'The Annual Review: The Emergence of a Corporatist Institution?' *Political Studies*, 37 (1989), 81–96; Martin J. Smith, *Pressure, Power and Policy: State Autonomy and Policy Networks in Britain and the United States* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993); Wyn Grant, 'The National Farmers Union: The Classic Case of Incorporation?' in David Marsh, ed., *Pressure Politics: Interest Groups in Britain* (London: Junction, 1983), pp. 129–43; Wyn Grant, 'Is Agricultural Policy Still Exceptional?' *Political Quarterly*, 66 (1995), 156–69; David Marsh and Martin Smith, 'Understanding Policy Networks: Towards a Dialectical Approach', *Political Studies*, 48 (2000), 4–21. But see Grant Jordan, William Maloney and Andrew McLaughlin, 'Characterizing Agricultural Policy-Making', *Public Administration*, 72 (1994), 505–26.

[43] Glenn R. Carroll, 'Organizational Ecology in Theoretical Perspective', in Glenn R. Carroll, ed., *Ecological Models of Organizations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1988), pp. 1–6, cited by Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation', p. 52.

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The final case study section reviews the population dynamics of this expanding rural 'group' population. In a way not anticipated by the PE literature there was considerable activity by the NFUS to 'thin out' the growing crowd of groups active in this space. The article concludes by stressing the place of such adaptation; and suggesting more attention be paid to 'creative survival'.

The research was principally based on primary interview data from group leaders, combined with secondary (internal) documentary data describing group responses.[44] Semi-structured interviews were undertaken between 2002 and 2005 with senior staff (most often CEOs or equivalent) from a number of key agricultural interest groups.[45] Interviewees were asked to discuss the factors affecting their organizations, links with other organizations, and future prospects.[46] These interviews also facilitated the collection of internal documentation. Additional interviews were carried out with policy-orientated staff of SEERAD (Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department).[47] Such interviews, alongside analysis of press releases and media commentary, assisted in triangulating claims made by NFUS staff.

THE RURAL CHALLENGE FOR THE NFUS

Establishing the scope of changes in the 'context' in which the NFUS operates is central to the population ecology interpretation. A number of factors (some Europe-wide) are salient. The first was the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reforms which moved payments from farmers for production and towards payment for the provision of so-called public benefits (for example, environmental care and rural development). This shift has been reinforced by pursuit of 'multifunctionality', whereby 'agriculture is viewed as a provider of public goods in addition to, and in many ways more important than its role as a producer of raw materials for the food industry'.[48] While some are sceptical of this rhetorical innovation,[49] rural development policy is emerging as a growth area as mechanisms like 'modulation' within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) enable farm payments to be moved from production to rural development schemes.

The 'rural turn' evident in CAP reform is matched in the Scottish context. A further change in Scotland derives from the process of devolution which shifted responsibility for agriculture and the environment from the British to the Scottish level. Post devolution, the 'multifunctionality' idea was reflected in a move from a stand-alone agricultural department to an integrated rural affairs department. Agricultural responsibilities moved

[44] Gray and Lowery, *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation*, p. 250.

[45] Interviews were conducted in early 2002 with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FAWG), Scottish Agricultural Organization Society (SAOS), National Farmers' Union of Scotland (NFUS), the Scottish Countryside Alliance (SCA), Women's Farming Union (WFU), People First and the Scottish Landowners Federation (SLF). The only group omitted was the Scottish Crofting Foundation. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the Countryside Alliance and the NFUS in 2005. In the views of respondents these groups constituted the main groups organizing the general farming sector.

[46] Where it has not been possible to attribute comments directly to organizations, quotes are simply attributed to respondents generally.

[47] Interviews were conducted with SEERAD staff in 2002 and 2005. In total, six interviews with staff from the Rural Development, Environment and Agriculture Policy Divisions were undertaken.

[48] Wayne Moyer and Tim Josling, *Agricultural Policy Reform* (Aldershot, Surrey: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 34–6.

[49] Alan Swinbank, 'EU Agriculture: Agenda 2000 and the WTO Commitments', *World Economy*, 22 (1999), 41–54.

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to the broader umbrella of the SEERAD. At least symbolically, the linking of agricultural, rural affairs and environmental protection functions suggests a diminution of the centrality of agriculture (and presumably its interests).[50] This followed the appointment of a Minister for Rural Affairs within the Scottish Executive. A series of documents also suggested an enhanced priority for rural development. For example, in the *Partnership for Scotland: An Agreement for the First Scottish Parliament* in May 1999, an entire section was dedicated to 'Rural Scotland' enunciating a guiding principle that, 'We will work to support and enhance rural life, rural communities and the rural economy'. Two subsequent post-devolution statements, *Rural Scotland: A New Approach (2000)*, and the *Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture (2001)*, focused on agriculture – within broader issues of environmental care, and rural and regional development. The *Forward Strategy* document asserted 'the importance of treating farming as part of our rural development, not separate'.[51] It stated that, 'farming is only part of the rural economy, but a healthy rural economy needs a healthy farming industry'.[52] In interview, the responsible junior minister stressed a 'virtuous circle' between agriculture, environment and rural development imperatives.

Europe-wide processes of CAP reform have encouraged relevant group mobilization beyond strict farming interests.[53] Scotland has been no different. The Executive's policy statements, referred to above, build on the input of a very diverse range of societal interests, including environmentalists, land owners, farmers, crofters, consumers, food companies, local government, recreational rural land users and tourism organizations.

To some degree these rhetorical innovations about rurality mimic structural shifts in Scottish farming.[54] In Scotland, as in most developed nations, full-time farm numbers are shrinking, farm operations are increasingly supported by off-farm incomes or are diversifying into non-farm businesses. Restructuring has challenged 'traditional' notions of what it means to practise agriculture and indeed who agriculturalists are: hobby farmers, crofters, large intensive producers and those managing extensive hill-farming enterprises all co-exist under the banner of 'farmers'. Diversity in activities and geography are potentially destabilizing factors on the group population as the group has to 'sell itself' to possibly incompatible audiences.

From the perspective of a broad PE approach, the environmental changes reviewed so far suggest that organizationally the NFUS is under pressure. The salient features of 'challenge' to the NFUS include: increased competition/activity from a diverse range of groups in (formerly) 'agricultural' policy spaces (crowded spaces); increased levels of governmental reform activity in 'agricultural' policy (things to be gained/lost); administrative reorganization (potential for loss of 'client' status); and a shrinking/contracting constituency base (a risk that levels drop below 'viability'). But did the NFUS leadership

[50] However, closer inspection reveals, as is often the case in administrative 'reform', the integration of the components of SEERAD appears limited. 'Headed notepaper (only)' reforms are commonplace.

[51] Scottish Executive, *Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture* (Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2001), p. 2.

[52] Scottish Executive, *Rural Scotland: A New Approach* (Edinburgh: Rural Affairs Department, 2001), p. 3.

[53] See Alan Greer, *Agricultural Policy in Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[54] Comprehensive discussion in Bill Slee, Andrew Barnes, Ken Thomson, Deb Roberts and Iain Wright, *Agriculture's Contribution to Scottish Society, Economy and Environment: A Literature Review*, Produced for the Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department and CRU (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen and Macaulay Land Use Research Institute, 2001).

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recognize this sombre analysis as irresistible? And what about the types of response (if any) this triggered?

THE NFU SCOTLAND: NEGOTIATING CHANGE

Reading the Environment: Towards 'Farming Plus'

While historically the NFUS has been successful as a political advocate, staff recognized the implications arising from CAP reform, and the absorption of this agenda into the British and Scottish policy paradigm.[55] Organizational survival for the NFUS required some (continuing) adaptation to the new political landscape. As one staff member commented:

> because of all the CAP money going into the industry, that meant that the wins were there on the political front, because if you could basically change that by a few percent you were putting money into your guy's pockets … It is what we are very good at. There will be less opportunities for that because the way the support is going to change … it is going to be a diminishing opportunity and therefore people are going to suddenly say is it really worthwhile paying so much for this?

While such an explanation of membership is inconsistent with the economically rational analysis set out by Olson, other studies have shown that members of the NFUS, like other groups, joined to support a broad constituency.[56] This 'explanation' is also at odds with the position of population ecology that 'demographic opportunity' (relative shifts in constituency size) tends to be an overwhelming influence on survival.

Yet this desire to reposition itself is repeated continually by NFUS leadership. Recently, the incoming president explained in his first press statement:

> The Industry needs a strong NFUS which adapts to a changing world. That means our role must broaden. The politics of farming, taking our members' voice to government, has always been the backbone of our work – it must remain so … However the days when the fortunes of farming were held solely in the hands of Ministers are gone. We have to cut it in a tough market.

He explains that schemes to engage members in developing commercial skills 'will be a key part of our future work'.[57]

What is most notable is that the NFUS has not openly contested the emerging policy agenda that proposes a less central focus for agriculture in the countryside, and a shift from production-related payments to payment for environmental or rural development services provided. The retiring president, Jim Walker, was noted in believing that ' the old insular refrain of farmers as a group requiring special treatment has been placed by a wider, more embracing language'.[58] This resonates well with the evidence. The NFUS has been a key player in the *Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture (2001)*, which, as canvassed earlier, places attention to agriculture within a broader context of environmental care, and rural and regional development. The rural turn is evident in the framing

[55] But the changes started before devolution because 'rural' policy discussion pre-dates devolution: Europeanization has been as important as 'Scottish-ization'.

[56] Grant Jordan and William Maloney, *The Protest Business* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

[57] NFUS, 'President: Road Ahead for NFUS' (2007, 62/07).

[58] *Dundee Courier*, 10 February 2003.

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of media comment. Media releases around the time of the *Strategy* document, and onwards, talk of 'Rural Reform Priorities'.[59] The details make clear this refers to the future of farmers' incomes under the threat of CAP reform, but the necessity to match the rural policy discourse is evident. Discussion of the value of farming is made increasingly with reference to their status as 'rural businesses' and their contribution to 'rural' communities and economies. They talk of 'farming's environmental, social and economic contribution to the rural economy and countryside'.[60] The cloaking of farming in a rural business mantle is recognition of the shifting policy discourse and the need for the NFUS to work with it; it is core to its strategy of adaptation to changed circumstances.

This raises the issue of niches. Certainly, groups seek to manœuvre themselves into policy monopoly positions, but it must be a worthwhile monopoly. A governmental redefinition towards the rural environment rather than agriculture meant the agricultural dominance was a devalued quality: the group had to find a position in a broader rural context. In practice, though, the NFUS do not view themselves as 'victims' of an adverse operating environment, but as active participants redefining the environment to find a new chapter in its organizational life. The NFUS, conscious of the rural turn in policy, emphasizes an opportunity rather than a threat; although they concede a degree of re-organization of themselves, and of the broader agricultural group population, is necessary. While Nownes, for example, counts group birth and death in a rough and ready way, this ignored the likely response of groups; namely, to merge, perhaps reorganize structures or even labels – that is, adapt or transform to stave off death; or, put another way, to continue to survive.

Indeed, this activism in redefining a place for farming amid agricultural policy reform has extended to a surprising accommodation between environmental and agricultural interests. This has not depended on the environmental conversion of farmers, but a recognition that this opens up new funding possibilities for regular farming activities: there is a coincidence of interest. The retiring NFUS president, Jim Walker, was reported to have said that the relationship between the union and environmental and conservation bodies was more constructive than previously: 'We have got closer to environmental bodies like the RSPB [The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (Scotland)], Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency – closer than we have ever been.' Walker singled out his membership of the Agriculture and Environment Working Group set up as a result of the *Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture* as 'significant'.[61] Joint action extends to the RSPB sponsoring a NFU Scotland Biodiversity Award.[62]

Increased government activity provides new opportunities for the NFUS to secure 'wins' for members, so long as it can adapt its message and secure support via relevant coalitions. For example, the NFUS has praised the establishment of Environmentally Sensitive Areas agreements and Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSIs) agreements, which see farmers paid for environmental services.[63] The same degree of application to find new opportunities is evident in its pursuit of reform to schemes under the Rural Development Regulation (RDR), which spends the growing volume of modulated CAP

[59] NFUS, 'First Minister Told of Rural Reform Priorities' (2003, 108/03).
[60] NFUS, 'Welcome Move Towards Land Management Contracts' (2004, 115/04).
[61] *Dundee Courier*, 10 February 2003.
[62] NFUS, 'Biodiversity Advocates Recognised by NFUS and RSPB Scotland' (2005, 36/05).
[63] NFUS, 'Environmental Funding Campaign Pays Dividend' (2003, 170/03).

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funds. Here its emphasis is on creating schemes under the RDR, which enable the broadest number of Scottish farmers to avail themselves of the support.[64] The NFUS has shifted its emphasis to reflect environmental change rather than wait for its core message to become redundant. Again, groups appear proactive in reading environmental changes and making sense of them.

It is not only the external policy environment that presents challenges. The impact of agricultural restructuring on the NFUS has seen declining levels of subscription income. While overall farm numbers (number of holdings) may have been relatively static in Scotland, the number of full-time farmers is in decline. It is this full-time sub-section of the farming constituency that the NFUS has historically sought to organize and represent. Farm consolidation among this section is 'hollowing out' subscription income. As one staff member explained, 'If my neighbour leaves farming, NFUS loses its sub and I gain another 500 acres, but if I already own 500 acres and the group secretary says, ''Now you have got this other farm,'' I will say, ''Yeah, I have but I am paying for this one and I am not paying for another one.'' ' With little prospect of increasing subscription income from full-time farmers, efforts are being made to shift away from this reliance on subscriptions. Another NFUS interview suggested, 'We are too reliant on subscription income. We are too slow to move off that dependence, we are subscription junkies! And the subscription income is under pressure.' The need for change is well recognized.

There was also awareness of the implications (and opportunities) for the NFUS of socio-economic and structural change in farming and rural communities: an interviewee acknowledged 'the interdependencies of agriculture' asserting that 'it is now very difficult to define the ''full-time'' farm'. The outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease was instrumental in revealing the extent of change. One respondent noted, 'Foot and Mouth Disease drew to our attention [to the fact] that 80 per cent of Scottish farms have other sources of income. So an awful lot of people who are local tourism providers etc. are also farmers and are members in that capacity'. He continued, 'And so, basically we no longer have a distinct constituency and we want to turn that into an opportunity, which means we need to start representing *farming plus'*. This approach was evident as early as 1998, when office bearers argued that 'potential enlargement of the present membership' could come from those 'currently on the fringes of the rural scene'.[65]

As shown below, new entrants to farming were viewed by the NFUS as a possible extension of the constituency:

> People come in who have made their money in an urban situation or commercial situation and go into the countryside and buy a property and they want to belong to what is all around them. And what are all around them is farmers. They buy into all this. Potentially they can be our political allies if we make good sense of it. We haven't in Scotland made good enough sense of it.

While the initial NFUS approach suggests an emphasis on addressing collective action issues to retain current core members (much as the incentive management or 'group maintenance' literature suggests is the core role of leaders),[66] subsequent discussions reveal a more complex strategy addressing 'demographic opportunity' issues – by increasing constituency size. But, while additional constituencies appear ripe for incorporation into the NFUS fold, there are difficulties in combining diverse interests.

[64] NFUS, 'Improvement of Rural Development Funding Crucial' (2003, 252/03).
[65] 'Angus Gives NFUS Full Backing over Restructuring', *Scotsman*, 17 July 1998, p. 30.
[66] Moe, *The Organization of Interests*.

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Anticipating Change: NFUS Reforms

As is evident, the NFUS is actively reading and interpreting its environment. Rather than viewing change as an indicator of irresistible contraction, the past few years have witnessed reforms to address implications. In recognizing the features of the group environment flagged by the population ecology literature, it has sought to cut its clothes to suit the cloth. It is salient that this activity is well organized and developed. It includes internal reports, commissioned reviews and presentations to senior staff and elected officials. It is important to note that NFUS interviewees (and associated documentation) established that the group leaders themselves connected the following set of reforms as a deliberate strategy.

In 1998 the NFUS started an ongoing internal reorganization. The resignation of the chief executive officer (CEO) and president in the same week catalysed sweeping changes in mid-1998. A new president appointed a new CEO, Ed Rainy Brown, who drove significant reforms. In the interim, a consultant delivered the Dent Report, which assessed challenges and reforms.[67] According to the new CEO, the organization 'had been very focussed on being political, producing good policy documentation but not doing the other things, not managing itself, not actually communicating adequately with the members which is why the members eventually rose up and said we don't like this'. He said that the reforms had two main aims, 'To make the organization somewhat more effective, but it was also to take quite a lot of cost out'.[68] The early emphasis on reforms can be summed up as, cost cutting, diversifying income streams and the membership base, and a long-term build-up of a service provision capacity.

The NFUS has sought to cost cut by reducing staff numbers and rationalizing decision-making tiers. At the start of 1998 the staff complement was twenty-five. This was reduced to twenty-one. However, the share of the staff dedicated to 'executive' policy work increased from twelve to seventeen. Interviews with staff indicate the intention here was to refocus the organization's policy capacity: to build on the strong political advocacy work but to develop it through a more sound and efficient organizational vehicle. One layer of the democratic structure was stripped out. In 1998 there were 117 branches; they were reduced to seventy-one. This caused difficulties as some branches that failed to meet the necessary size resisted mergers.[69] However, the reforms went through and the structure is now relatively settled.

Methods used to increase income from other sources have included corporate sponsorship of conferences, expanding membership categories and providing services. Its Annual Conference, due to corporate sponsorship, is now a money earner rather than a cost.[70] In May 2001, the NFUS launched two new membership categories, NFUS Professional and NFUS Professional*Plus*. These were both aimed at adjunct professionals and were essentially a minor repackaging of information products. The aim was a modest broadening out of the membership base such that the NFUS could have grounds for claiming to constitute a more 'rural' voice. Most recently, the incoming NFUS president has proposed an associate membership to attract younger farmers who have yet to take over from their parents into the organization.[71]

[67] 'Closer union links urged', *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 13 May 1998, p. 18.
[68] NFUS interview, March 2002.
[69] 'No vote for 20 NFU branches', *Scotsman*, 24 February 2001, p. 10.
[70] NFUS interview, March 2002.
[71] *Scotsman*, 6 March 2007, p. 43.

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While the NFUS has provided a range of services for some time, in 2001 it developed NFUS Assist, a farm office service to complete all the necessary farm administrative work for its clients. However, by January 2003 the farming press was recording that it had lost over £150,000 in eighteen months and NFU Mutual had written off a £100,000 investment. NFU Assist had secured only a hundred clients.[72] It was axed in 2003. The shift to a business service role was clearly going to be more complex than was initially estimated. As would be expected, the NFUS has drawn lessons from this failure. The chief executive officer suggested that 'the Union has to identify what it can provide directly and realistically by itself or in partnership'.[73]

That these types of reviews and reforms are undertaken at all is important in so far as it illustrates the general point that groups are active in making the best of their (organizational) environment. Most recently, the NFUS has reiterated its commitment to reform. The Deputy CEO recently explained, 'We are taking a hard look at ourselves. We have been in the business of politics for decades; now we're trying to help farmers connect more with the supply chain'.[74] Part of this reorientation includes the provision of services and courses that develop individual member's business acumen.[75] While the temptation may be to view this as a negative sign of organizational crisis punctuating what ought to be a 'normal' state of stability, our interpretation is that it would be more surprising if the NFUS were *not* constantly reviewing and revisiting the question of group survival. While population ecology approaches have so far focused on overall numbers (how many are born and how many die), it is just as important to be attentive to how organizational form[76] may change in the middle ground between birth and death as groups try to survive.

Yet these reforms amounted to rather limited processes of tinkering with internal structures aimed at extracting efficiencies and attracting the largest possible membership from the existing target group (full-time farmers). Perhaps the largest and most significant finding is the willingness of the NFUS to think beyond the existing focus on farming as a possible way to reach beyond the limits its own organizational survival as a general farming organization. The NFUS has identified opportunities in the emerging rural policy landscape. It has already taken the symbolic step of removing direct references to farmers in its title, becoming NFU Scotland,[77] and defining its vision as 'to be seen as an outstanding rural organization effectively representing farming and associated activity in the countryside'. It has subsequently sought to back-fill this claim by negotiating links with the broader 'rural' group population.

RURAL PROLIFERATION: GROUP POPULATIONS AND POLICY ACTIVITY

While this article has focused on the NFUS, the group population within which it is embedded is important. In taking this aspect seriously, the article aligns itself with population ecology, notwithstanding reservations.

[72] *Courier and Advertiser*, 27 January 2003.

[73] 'Former top civil servant relishes union challenge', *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 29 November 2003, p. 21.

[74] 'Rivals bid for leadership of NFUS', *Scotsman*, 22 December 2006, p. 43.

[75] NFUS, 'Learning the Lessons of the Supply Chain' (2005, 158/05).

[76] A change in organizational form for us does not mean the end of a specific species of group (i.e. general agricultural group or trade association) but emerging qualitative differences within these species (such as changing membership criteria, name or overall influence strategy).

[77] 'Name change for NFUS', *Scotsman*, 19 May 2001, p. 15.

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The Farming Core: Stable Populations Confronting Change

In contrast with Nownes's focus on gay and lesbian groups, agriculture is a mature sector where core constituency size is clearly in decline and governmental attention is shifting. Nevertheless, outwardly perhaps, counting the raw numbers of like-groups active in a given policy area, the picture of Scottish agriculture would be of a crowded space. Inspection of public consultation in Scotland on CAP reform in 2003 confirms a very broad range of relevant groups.[78] Approached in abstract PE terms, these would all be counted as the 'farming' group population and assumed to be in a relationship of outright competition, both for influence over the same issues and for a share of the same constituency base (i.e. members). Yet these groups are involved in a far more complex set of relationships.

As an umbrella group speaking for Scottish agricultural producers, the NFUS has no direct competitors, but there are significant overlaps. The Scottish Landowners Federation (SLF, now the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association – SRPBA) represents landowners, which includes farmers, the Scottish Crofters Foundation (formerly the Scottish Crofters Union) represents primary producers in the Highlands and Islands, and the Scottish Organic Producers Association (SOPA) represents the organic sub-sector. There are also a few separate commodity groupings (for example, Quality Meat Scotland) but even those are well integrated into the NFUS structure. Similarly, breed associations tend to work harmoniously with NFUS rather than competitively. An examination of NFUS media releases shows a pattern of networking or partnership between it and, for instance, the SRPBA and the Scottish Crofting Foundation,[79] and the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association.[80] At interview, the NFUS stated, 'We are technically competing over the same market for members but co-operate over policy.'[81] However, these groups have been a stable 'core' of the population for some decades, each managing to find their niche. Potentially at least, however, this relatively stable set of relationships has been shaken up by the proliferation of groups activated by a higher priority to rural than agricultural issues within both UK and Scottish governments.

As elaborated earlier, population ecology argues that the decision to engage in political life is made on the basis that there is something to lobby for. As such, shifts in government attention and resources promote heightened levels of group formation. In the case of Scottish agriculture (but there is no reason to suppose it would be much different in other European Union (EU) jurisdictions), the recent emphasis of government has been on rural development. While, as noted above, this is largely rhetorical at this stage, the opening up of this new policy terrain was recognized by most organizations interviewed. In particular, they recognized the importance of a raft of rural issues, such as rural service provision and social inclusion. But, as a NFUS interviewee noted, they are constrained by lack of resources from extending and broadening their scope to such issues when so much

[78] Those listed as responding under farming and land management included NFU Scotland (NFUS), Scottish Crofting Foundation (SCF), Scottish Landowners Federation (SLF), Scottish Organic Producers Association (SOPA), National Sheep Association, North West Cattle Producers Association, National Beef Association Scotland, Scottish Dairy Association, Scottish Tenant Farmers Action Group. Other agricultural industry groups (those working for actors further up the supply chain than farming) included Scottish Agricultural Associations Society (SOAS) and Quality Meat Scotland (QMS).

[79] NFUS, 'Industry Challenges Agri-Environment Payment Proposals' (2005, 99/05).

[80] NFUS, 'Rural Organisations Co-operate for Future of Tenanted Sector' (2007, 36/07).

[81] NFUS interview, 2005.

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of their time is still taken up with administering and reforming the CAP bureaucracy. The respondent commented that what with:

> the broader rural development stuff that includes social and economic issues, there just isn't the resources left for the Union to take a lot of them on. And yet in the eyes of local people I think these issues are rising in importance all the time. Because so many rural social institutions and structures are broken down and disappearing.

The inadequacy of any initial attempts by established groups to cover these 'non-core' issues, combined with increased government attention has led to an explosion of broadly 'rural' organizations or single issue groups each elaborating a different 'rurality'. Groups such as the Scottish Countryside Alliance, People Too and Rural Rebels all emerged in the early 2000s in Scotland. One commentator has identified the outpouring of discontent as driven 'by what is seen as an inability on the part of the Scottish Executive to offer a clear lead … particularly as the interdependence between agriculture and other rural industries has been explicitly and officially recognised'.[82] Shifting government agendas attract new entrants and shape populations of groups before government.

The NFUS has potentially antagonistic relations with these kinds of groups representing different issue definitions. Lowery and Gray note that in a competitive group market associations with large memberships have difficulty in resisting rivals with a narrower focus:

> Such associations may have a more difficult time satisfying the preferences of all of its members than a similar association in a smaller jurisdiction or in an earlier time period. Thus, incentives to seek more specific modes of representation will increase as economies increase in size … thus, larger or growing jurisdictions should have more specialist associations.[83]

They suggest a 'competitive exclusion' of generalist business associations *vis-à-vis* specialist associations.

However, empirically it can be observed that these newer groups are often frustrated because, as one interviewee noted, 'government is relying so much on this single interface with the Union that all these other groups are finding it difficult. They can get the message through but to get influence is very difficult'. While the NFUS may feel its political weight threatened, it still seems dominant to others. Above all, what is most salient is not the number of groups that have emerged, but that NFUS staff have registered their existence, that they are not always the outright competitors suggested in population ecology theory and that the competitive exclusion principle seems not to be the implied natural law of group populations. Processes of leader-led group adaptation seem the foundation of more plausible accounts.

Adopting the Rural Mantle: Redefining Scope as a Strategy for Survival

As may be predicted by population ecology approaches, the rural turn has fostered a growth in groups. But not all these groups share the same origins. Groups such as People Too have emerged from a more or less producer-based constituency in direct opposition to prevailing government and NFUS approaches to CAP reform and programmes related to land use. They are not membership based, but sustain themselves through supporters and donations.

[82] 'Rural voices keep up the pressure', *Courier and Advertiser*, 10 December 2001, p. 13.
[83] Lowery and Gray, 'Bias in the Heavenly Chorus', p. 19.

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Other groups are less 'new' entrants to the population and more 'late adopters' of the rural mantle. Behind this growth lies another story about the capacity for groups to find strategies that shift the odds of survival in their favour by gathering broader constituencies and modifying messages.[84] Group entrepreneurs submerge their core set of 'unpopular' issues in broader themes of rurality that have a more popular resonance. The Scottish Countryside Alliance (SCA), for example, is just such a group. Its narrow constituency, those who go out to shoot game and hunt foxes (at its most broad, rural sports) has an unpopular message. As a representative agreed, 'The message we have to sell is not popular – we kill living animals.' However, groups have resources at their disposal to undermine the type of dynamic that threatens survival. The SCA has associated itself, and some may say quite successfully, with a broader rural agenda.[85]

But the pattern of re-badging (and accessing a broader constituency base) is in fact a far wider phenomenon. The NFUS is but one group asserting that it is a rural voice. For instance, *Rural*Scotland (the business name for the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland) claims that it is 'Scotland's Countryside Champion'. Also, in March 2004, the Scottish Landowners Federation (SLF) re-launched itself as the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association (SRPBA) which claims on its website to 'uniquely represent the role and interests of those involved with rural property and businesses connected with the land'. Each of these groups seeks to popularize its core issues by attaching them to broader rural concerns. As we will see, the NFUS has taken a more ambitious approach, pursuing mergers to back up its claims to rural representation. While population ecology may have us focus on changing population densities within fixed constituency boundaries (species guilds), we find more evidence of changing constituency boundaries to sustain fixed *core group populations*. When the NFUS and other groups struggle to survive as a 'farming' species, they seek to reinvent themselves as a 'rural' species operating in a larger 'space'.

Governmental Preferences: Constraining Population Growth?

While commentators have questioned the longevity of these 'flash' groups, given their unwillingness to adopt a political strategy more conducive to relations with government, there is still concern about the long-term impact of these groups on the status of established groups like the NFUS.[86] A member of the Scottish Parliament's Rural Development Committee remarked: 'the Rural Rebels are not helping rational argument and threaten seriously to undermine the NFU leadership'.[87] However, others saw these protest groups as reinforcing the value of working with stable incumbents, in effect enhancing their look of respectability.

Interviews with a number of SEERAD staff suggested that limits on growth come from government preferences. Clearly, there was a residual preference to work with the

[84] Lowery and Gray, 'Bias in the Heavenly Chorus', refer to 'Tails and Peaks'. They suggest that the relative under- or over-mobilization of groups in issue areas occurs because interests hostile to public opinion are harder to organize (and vice versa). This suggests that as tail issues – those with less political salience – become peak issues, then population should likewise shift. Thus, as rural issues gain saliency, and individuals come to see themselves as part of a rural rather than farming constituency, groups would have more chance of organizing as a rural group. The population ecology literature foreshadows this type of shift, but group counting methods make it hard to pick up.

[85] For instance, its recent initiative to sponsor rural youth to experience fishing activities – combating social exclusion – highlights the type of strategy SCA takes to popularize 'countryside pursuits' as part of a rural development vision.

[86] Editorial, 'Is rural lobby prepared to compromise?' *Scotsman*, 17 December 2001.

[87] Mark Macaskill, 'NFU urged to expel rebels', *Sunday Times*, 10 February 2002, p. 10.

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established groups, in particular the NFUS. This preference was based on the expertise and the ability of the NFUS to speak for an identifiable constituency. The respondents explained that where these organizational attributes are not evident: 'You are in danger of negotiating with leaders of the group who may or may not be representative of their membership. You could get leaders in and they may be reasonable people and you could come to some sort of deal and that just falls apart.' While flash groups proliferate and birth rates seem largely unfettered at this early stage, these create some problems for the government in terms of policy capacity. As such, there is value, both for the NFUS and government, in the NFUS broadening its stake as an authoritative voice for rural issues or else solidifying alliances and bringing to a sustainable level the proliferation of groups. The governmental preference for straightforward and uncomplicated group–government relations inverts the group population dynamics (particularly the proposition that groups proliferate with increased governmental attention) set out by population ecology.

THINNING THE INTEREST-GROUP POPULATION: TOWARDS A RURAL GROUP FOR SCOTLAND?

Incumbent groups, and particularly the NFUS, recognize the emerging rural policy space and have been active in working with other groups to fill it. This is not quite the same outright group competition anticipated by the population ecology account. Rather than more competition among groups pursuing like or allied interests – a 'survival of the fittest' battle – groups here look to short-circuit fatal 'feedback loops'. They try to 'thin out' the interest-group population in a voluntary manner. Established groups have attempted to shake out the group population and achieve some stability in what is emerging as a relatively hostile operating environment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the incumbent or largest group, the NFUS, which is acting as a broker.

This work has value for government. Without an identifiable, distinctive and organized 'rural' constituency, and an encompassing rural representative organization, the Executive is left to consult a plethora of farming, countryside pursuits, crofting, landowner and single-issue or protest groups, each without the immediate means or willingness to accommodate each other's views. As explained more generally in the public policy literature, the absence of an authoritative 'policy public' hampers attempts at policy coherence: in this case, a robust non-farm (at least not exclusive) rural policy.[88] For the various reasons outlined above, the 'invisible hand' of the interest-group system has not intervened in any 'automatic' manner to cull and thin the population. The type of regulation envisaged by population ecology focuses on competition between groups representing similar interests and requires the agency of others to come into effect: it must be made to work. And as tentatively hinted at by Nownes, the role of leadership cadres – their reading and interpretation of environmental change – is crucial.

Sifting and Sorting the Expanding Group Population: Manipulating Regulatory Pressures

The population ecology literature suggests that group birth rates are high but so too are mortality rates among newcomers. The endeavour of the NFUS to secure viability

[88] Peter J. May, Bryan D. Jones, Betsi E. Beem, Emily A. Neff-Sharum and Melissa K. Poague, 'Policy Coherence and Component-Driven Policymaking: Arctic Policy in Canada and the United States', *Policy Studies Journal*, 33 (2005), 37–63.

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through growing into the rural development space appears, perhaps surprisingly, to have been assisted by the notable expansion, even if temporarily, of the 'agricultural/farming/environment' group population. In some cases, such flash groups are viewed as useful indicators of new abutting constituencies ripe for the picking. In others, the view is that, since they lack the resources to gain a permanent hold or a 'new' constituency base, they can be largely ignored. As in previous sections, the attitude of incumbent groups and the government to newcomers – shaped by their value to them – tends to predict their long-term fortunes. The government preference for 'known' quantities creates a deal of inertia in relation to making any addition to the group population 'stick' in the long term.

While these 'new' groups may be seen as undermining established 'insiders', the NFUS in fact interprets them as aids to the process of accumulating and extending existing core constituencies. An NFUS staff member noted of the Scottish Countryside Alliance: 'they have been quite clever in attracting many of the countryside dwellers, the ''wellington'' brigade … There is a constituency there.' He continued: 'They have got a good name and they are principally interested in the sporting interests. That is their main interest. And that is fine, let's pull that into the structure in some way if we can.' This is less the case for other flash groups. For example, speaking of the Rural Rebels, a NFUS staff member noted: 'The main problem they cause is that of the 100 or so that are members, 50 or 60 are probably NFUS members. And some of them get stroppy with us when we put the Rural Rebels down publicly when they are silly. We have to do that.' The temporary increase in government attention to rural matters has combined to make the cost of rural group formation low. But the NFUS sees these conditions as sufficiently temporary for it to be worthwhile for them to wait for the flash groups to die off. Those with a more successful niche in the group population are taken more seriously.

Towards Group Merger?

Another way in which groups deal with population pressures is that of merger. And in the case of the NFUS some commentators have openly toyed with the idea of a merger or an umbrella rural organization. One has argued that: 'The obvious link up that, provided it was carried out correctly, would reduce expenditure is a closer bond between the two campaigning organizations, the Scottish Landowners Federation and the National Farmers' Union of Scotland'. He goes on: 'Despite the Union [NFUS] and the SLF still being seen as leading pressure organisations on the rural scene, both now see membership dropping … And, as subscriptions drop, both bodies face an increasing welter of proposed legislation from Brussels, Westminster and Holyrood'.[89]

Interviews confirm that some organizations have already had discussions about possible mergers. One senior NFUS staff member commented: 'The only way the NFU Scotland is going to be able to do any of that is if it works in partnership with others. Horizontal partnerships where we will work together with other people, other organizations and do things together, and that is the big idea, Scotland's Rural Voice'. Several other interviewees indicated that there had been serious contemplation of the development of a broad rural organization in Scotland.

Of course, there is considerable skill required in taking advantage of these opportunities for 'merger'. For instance, interviewees revealed a range of impediments to the amalgamation

[89] Andrew Arbuckle, 'Time to consider campaigning cost stripping?' *Courier and Advertiser*, 15 October 2001, p.13.

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of existing organizations going ahead. These included (i) the rationalization of organizations would lead to a reduction in the available number of office bearer and paid staff roles; (ii) the membership themselves may see their voice being diluted (crofters, who may feel culturally distinct, might not be pleased with working alongside the broader farming community); and (iii) generating a coherent voice would be difficult without ending up with lowest common denominator outcomes. Indeed, one interviewee summarized his opinions as follows: the strong identity of the Crofters, for instance, meant that the best option was a partnership relationship that maintained their political identity. Despite the clear difficulties, the idea of a merger was being openly discussed by an incumbent NFUS president who said, 'the only way we could get our income bigger is to link with another organization – with us as the lead body'.[90]

It is apparent that while this type of voluntary thinning of interest-group populations (by merger) goes on, it is governed by a logic that appreciates issues such as the perceived loss of collective identity. These are all issues underappreciated in the population ecology approach. This is evident in Nownes's study where he noted the 'problem' of how to count mergers. While acknowledging they are 'qualitatively different' from deaths, in the end he had to 'count' a merger as equivalent to the death of one group.[91]

Again, as with group growth, the response of government is also central to any such enterprise. While admitting that the prospect of a single rural organization would be preferable, one respondent amongst the civil servants did register some scepticism about the likelihood of it being realized given the divergent views of the NFUS, SLF and the Crofters Foundation, who would, in large part, make up such an organization. The respondent observed, 'I suppose the issue would be that, if you had one body, ''The national rural union'', how would they achieve consensus? If they came to us and said X is a problem, this might make it difficult for other constituent parts to get a proper hearing.'

The NFUS itself recognizes the barriers to merger, stating: 'One of the problems with achieving consolidation is that we are big brother and everybody says that we will just become underdogs.' Thus, mergers can be shaped by the degree of political plausibility the end result might have, and on the possibility of a united organizational identity.

Less Formal Relationships: A Rural Network?

There are indications of the direction in which group consolidation might develop. Apart from the talk of mergers, there was some mention of leveraging the role of the NFUS as a hub for other organizations to work around. One interviewee proposed that: 'The role [of the NFUS] needs to change by accepting the Union can't do everything. It actually needs to co-ordinate a network that draws in all these other interests as it can't do it all itself. Of course, managing the network is a big job in itself, but there is no other way.'

Indeed, such a network seems to exist already in an embryonic form. Several of those interviewed confirmed the existence of the Scottish Countryside Information Exchange. It is, as one respondent described, 'a networking body not a forum and not developing policies but creating a discussion environment'. The Exchange includes a range of fringe

[90] 'Hustings call for NFUS merger', *Scotsman*, 8 February 2003, p. 24.

[91] Nownes and Lipinski's, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Death', p. 309, data on gay and lesbian rights groups reports that of the ninety-eight groups, twenty-five died. However, this is qualified in a footnote as follows 'Actually, one of the twenty-five merged with another group. Though there is some evidence that mergers are qualitatively different phenomena from disbandings, in this article we treat as ending events the same (primarily because only one group ''died'' by merging)'.

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and established groups. Apart from this networking opportunity, there was clearly a high degree of communication amongst existing organizations. Some had direct and institutionalized links, whilst others merely kept in touch with one another informally.

However, others were less enthusiastic about this network developing into anything more formal. Several interviewees were of the opinion that the Scottish Executive often simply added up the responses for and against a proposal in the context of public consultations. One interviewee concluded from this that a single rural organization would amount to less rather than more influence, indeed it was better 'to land a left and right hook'. This type of argument offends the usual value attributed to group organizational unity among similar interests. Again, it reinforces the message that the dynamics of group populations is underpinned by the subjective views, convictions and 'rules of thumb' adopted by those who have responsibility for strategic decision making within groups.[92] In short, for these principles to have their stated effects relies on them being the perceived wisdom of group leaders themselves (not only of group scholars).

Future Moves?

Interviews conducted with groups, including the NFUS, in 2007 suggest that the earlier enthusiasm for an extension of the farming constituency to allied rural land users and owners – perhaps even rural dwellers – was perhaps misplaced. Asked about the relations with various rural and countryside groups, a NFUS staff member conceded, 'The NFUS has stepped away from that, believing that an engagement is not in the long-term benefit of rural people and areas, we have kept a reasonable distance'. The staff member explained that there has been no development of the idea of the NFUS as the core of a rural hub, and that the tendency to fragmentation and the growth of single-issue groups remained problematic for them. 'We are trying to be a broad church, which means committing to measured and pragmatic responses, which is difficult at times.' He concluded, 'It would be easier to speak with one group for rural matters but I do not think it is possible; there are too many competing demands.' It is the net sum of these types of (changeable) views adopted by all relevant groupings, rather than an objective calculus of environmental change, that dictates group populations. While populations are clearly influenced by environmental factors enunciated by the population ecology approach, it is the *perception* of these same factors by groups themselves that brings them into play and structures responses.

CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL OPPORTUNISM

The organization of Scottish farmers provides an insight into the way in which a change in emphasis in agricultural policy and changes amongst farming communities come together to place considerable pressure on organizations representing farmers. A shrinking constituency, the ascendancy of rural rather than agricultural policy problems (and associated administrative reforms), and a crowded policy landscape, all serve to challenge the survival of general farm organizations.

[92] A similar point is made by Page, who reports: 'A representative of a social welfare group suggested that the insider/outsider distinction was inaccurate in part because groups can act in a concerted manner, so that some pursue outsider tactics of mobilising public support as part of a broader strategy which involves other groups pursuing insider approaches of calm, factual and reasoned argument, a "good cop/bad cop" strategy.' (See Ed Page, 'The Insider/Outsider Distinction: An Empirical Investigation', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1 (1999), 205–14, p. 211.)

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While this article demonstrates that environmental factors are important, it also shows group leaders/managers can by-pass the types of environmental challenge listed in the literature. That these types of factors are critical is not contested here, but they are not irresistible. The overall key finding in this article is that *negative environmental factors do not inextricably lead to decline, but are often confronted and managed by group leaders*. One way to build constructively on the population ecology approach is to become much more sensitive to group changes that *are not* captured by birth or death. The emphasis on gathering the views of group leaders and other policy-related actors has revealed a number of factors that serve to interrupt the direct translation of environmental change on group populations.

The NFUS leadership have not viewed challenging environmental factors as deterministic. Rather they have sought to pre-empt or anticipate their changing operational environment. Group leaders actively seek to subvert the impact of negative environmental conditions. The initial response was to seek resources from sponsors and create services to compensate for the ongoing decline in constituency size and its subscription income base. They sought to recreate a selective incentive for membership through the provision of business services. Had they diagnosed a different set of challenges, they might well have adopted a different type of strategic response. This serves to highlight a second conclusion: *leaders' interpretations of the implications of environmental change come to substantially determine the ultimate group response*.

The NFUS also engaged in a more ambitious attempt at regulating the group environment 'voluntarily'. This case showed groups may merge or network as a way to continue surviving. Such responses (and concerns) are far more complex and multivalent than the 'populate or perish' approach of the population ecology model. The third conclusion is that *leaders may voluntarily seek to pare back or reorganize the population to viable levels*. This account of proactive, multivalent and complex approaches by group leaders is an important qualification to the 'automatic' mechanism implied by a strict reading of the population ecology model.

Groups interpreted the increased government attention to rural issues as an opportunity to mobilize interests. The weakening of the authority of the farm lobby and the talking up of the importance of a rural constituency has created a larger (albeit fragmented) policy constituency. And, as the population ecology model suggests, more energy in the system creates conditions to sustain more groups. A plethora of groups emerged to articulate the rural dimension. These groups often assert alternative, if not coherent, Scottish rural and agricultural agendas. These potentially undermine existing farmer representatives. However, rather than see this as necessarily negative, the NFUS viewed the proliferation of competition as an opportunity to weave together a network or coalition for rural Scotland. The fourth conclusion is that *emerging 'competing' groups may assist group leaders in surviving challenging circumstances*.

Other actors are also prominent in altering the way in which the feedback loop kicks in and starts to shape the group population. For example, government preferences are for working with responsible and authoritative groups. While group proliferation may be a relatively straightforward response to government agendas, ongoing survival after formation is partly contingent upon government attitudes to the new populations it confronts. Just as groups may seek to prune and thin the group population, governments may also seek (albeit subtly) to influence such efforts. The fifth conclusion here is that *governments may actively intervene to modify and streamline group populations*.

This article illustrates how environmental factors can be offset by the responses of groups. More than animal populations, interest groups are aware of the problems – and

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can respond to them in an activist manner. What appear as objectively fixed constraints on groups are mediated by leaders. Thus a simplified emphasis in population ecology on 'intra-species' competition as the dynamic that brings environmental change into play is too generalized. The pattern reported here seems compatible with work on the manipulation of group identity.[93] The organizational ecology approach oversimplifies when it simply registers formation of a named group as 'birth' and the termination of that label as 'death'. It fails to recognize adequately the importance of groups redefining their task or reorganizing themselves. In summary, it does not detect the way groups survive by transforming or adapting organizational form. Processes of leader-led group adaptation and transformation are perhaps the foundation of more plausible accounts.

[93] Michael T. Heaney, 'Identity Crisis: How Interest Groups Struggle to Define Themselves in Washington', in A. Cigler and B. Loomis, eds, *Interest Group Politics* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2007), pp. 278–300.

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