

Researching Scotland's Ruralities

SCRR's one-day event in Perth in March 2013 examined 'social science perspectives on current issues in rural Scotland'

PHOTOGRAPH: STEPH WRIGHT



A wide variety of social science researchers gathered in Perth to share perspectives on rural matters

LOOKING AT SOCIAL SCIENCE is a relatively novel undertaking for SCRR, which to date has concentrated more on the biological, agricultural and environmental aspects. The aim was to encourage social scientists (broadly interpreted) working on topics in a rural context to come together to exchange information and insights, and to help SCRR develop a more fully cross-disciplinary approach to 'rural research'.

The meeting had a number of focus points but was also planned to encourage researchers to network: researchers who were not presenting were invited to display posters giving information about their projects. It was supported by SCRR and by the ESRC Genomics Policy and Research Forum, based at the University of Edinburgh.

The meeting was structured around four main sessions, each designed to push at the boundaries of the

conventional conception of rural sociology/rural social anthropology.

The session on 'multiple land uses, knowledges and the resulting tensions' focused on the increasing diversity of land uses in rural areas of Scotland: agriculture, forestry, conservation, building, hunting, species re-introductions, leisure industries and 'alternative' energy. It examined the different kinds of rural land, as understood from an agro-environmental point of view, and looked at the ways in which competition between various land-use objectives is handled. Consideration was also given to the ways in which various forms of expertise are invoked to legitimise different land-use practices.

Rural social science often tacitly overlooks questions of political culture and party politics in rural areas, focusing instead on rural identities. The

session on the 'political sociology of rural Scotland' took advantage of the current urgent debate over national identity to explore some aspects of the political sociology of rural Scotland and, in the light of the changing demography of Scotland's rural regions, to examine new kinds of emerging ethnic identities in rural areas.

Policy makers are keen to envisage a rural Scotland characterised by vibrancy and empowerment. The session on 'empowerment and vibrancy in rural society' used case-study material to examine the extent to which different forms of rural community in Scotland can be viewed in this light. It also highlighted recent policy initiatives, including initiatives around rural transport and around capacity-building and leadership in communities, to investigate whether they have acted to promote dynamism in rural communities and to see who the principal beneficiaries have been.

The final main session was entitled 'Sustainability in rural Scotland'. It considered how communities are affected by national and international sustainability agendas, looking – for example – at the way that livestock farmers understand and respond to the recent policy focus on sheep and cows as contributors to global warming and at the ways in which rural communities have responded to new opportunities for devolved electricity generation. In this way the session enquired into the local meanings attached to sustainability in rural cultures and practices.

During the closing discussion panellists and the audience attended to broad conclusions from the day's presentations, and expressed a strong enthusiasm to take forward work on rural social science as part of SCRR's developing activities.

Environmental and Agricultural Metagenomics Forum

October 2nd, 2013, Battleby Conference Centre, Perth

METAGENOMICS IS A NEW AREA of research and innovation which studies the genetic code of multiple species extracted directly from environmental samples of diverse kinds. It crosses molecular biology, informatics, ecology, soil, water and other environmental sciences. There are several international initiatives in this area; for example, The Human Microbiome Project has shown the importance of understanding the

microbiome that is associated with every macroorganism.

The aim of this workshop is to raise awareness of the opportunities and benefits of these approaches for agriculture and the environment in Scotland. It will update attendees on the latest technologies, new scientific frontiers and the range of



potential applications and benefits for answering the important questions we have about agriculture, biodiversity, environmental well-being and conservation.

Registration fee is £50.

Further details are available from the events page of the SCRR website at www.scrr.ac.uk/events.php